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SALAR

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PHOTO: PTI

Kendriya Vidyalaya receives bomb threat in City

BENGALURU, 4 FEB

The Kendriya Vidyalaya IISC School, Bengaluru, received a bomb threat via email on Sunday. The email sent from the address sahukarisrinu-vasarao65@gmail.com claimed that the bomb was planted inside the school and the blast would take place at 10.20am. The institution immediately informed the local police about the email. Police and bomb squad arrived immediately at the school to thoroughly inspect the premises. The Principal of Kendriya Vidyalaya, Amritbala, filed a complaint in Yeshwanthpur police station, initiating an investigation into the matter. The principal in his complaint expressed concern about the security of staff and students. Earlier in December, around 15 schools in the city received bomb threats. However no suspicious items or bombs were found and the threat mails were considered to be hoax mails.
—Salar News

Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra to cover 650 km in 6 days in MP

BHOPAL, 4 FEB

Rahul Gandhi-led Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra will cover a 650-km distance in six days after entering Madhya Pradesh, a senior Congress leader said on Sunday. AICC General Secretary in-charge of Madhya Pradesh Jitendra Singh said the schedule of the yatra, including the date of arrival, will be announced later. "We discussed the route the Yatra will take in MP, places of public meetings etc today. The Yatra will cover a stretch of 650 km in six days in Madhya Pradesh," Singh told reporters in Gwalior. He said the program was discussed with Congress MLAs in the Gwalior division, district presidents, and senior leaders.*—PTI*
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PHOTO: PTI

Fiscal deficit is 5.8% under NDA, says Chidambaram

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

Noting that much has been made of the fiscal correction made by the government, senior Congress leader P Chidambaram on Sunday said the fiscal deficit was 4.5 per cent in the UPA's terminal year 2013-14 while it is 5.8 per cent under the NDA in 2023-24. The former finance minister asserted that there is no place for a "bullhorn" in economics. In a post on X, Chidambaram said much has been made of the fiscal correction made by the NDA government and the fiscal deficit of 5.8 per cent in 2023-24. "Since memories are short, I may jog the memories of the learned commentators. Under the UPA, the Fiscal Deficit in 2007-08 was 2.5 per cent. In the terminal year of UPA (2013-14) the Fiscal Deficit was 4.5 per cent. In the terminal year of NDA (2023-24) the Fiscal Deficit is 5.8 per cent," he said.*—PTI*

Indian embassy employee arrested for spying for Pak ISI

UP ATS arrested him from Moscow for sharing 'confidential' info

LUCKNOW, 4 FEB

The Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) of Uttar Pradesh Police has arrested a person working in the Indian Embassy, Moscow, for his alleged involvement in anti-national activities with Pakistani intelligence agency ISI and providing them important confidential information regarding the strategic activities of the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of External Affairs and the Indian military establishments, an official statement issued here on Sunday said.

Satendra Siwal, the son of Jaiveer Singh, a resident of Shahmahiuddinpur village in police station area of Hapur district has been arrested by the ATS, the statement said. Siwal is working in the Ministry of External Affairs and presently posted in the Indian Embassy in Moscow, Russia, it said.

The ATS was receiving intelligence from various confidential sources that the handlers of the Pakistani intelligence agency ISI, through some persons, were luring the employees of the Ministry of External Affairs with money to obtain strategically and strategically important information related to the Indian Army that is likely to pose a huge threat to the internal and external security of India, the statement said.

The ATS in its probe through electronic and physical surveillance found that Siwal was involved in anti-India activities with the network of the ISI handlers and providing important confidential information regarding the strategic activities of the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of External Affairs and the Indian military establishments is being made available to them for money, it added.

Siwal was called to the ATS field unit Meerut and interrogated as per rules, the statement said. He could not give satisfactory answers and confessed to his crime.

An FIR has been registered against Siwal, who is working as the India Based Security Assistant in the Indian Embassy in Moscow, Russia, from 2021, at ATS police station, Lucknow, under Section 121A of the IPC (waging war against the country) and official secrets Act 1923, the statement said. *—PTI*

UP ATS arrest an employee of Ministry of External Affairs, who is accused of working as an ISI agent in Indian Embassy in Moscow *PHOTO: ANI*

AMID POACHING FEARS

Bihar Congress MLAs flown to Hyderabad

JMM, Congress MLAs onboard at aircraft to Hyderabad from Ranchi on Sunday *PHOTO: ANI*

NEW DELHI/PATNA, 4 FEB

All but three MLAs of Congress in Bihar, the second largest constituent of the 'Mahagathbandhan', which lost power last week, were on Sunday flown to Hyderabad amid fears of poaching by BJP-led NDA, party sources said.

When contacted, AICC Bihar in-charge Mohan Prakash neither confirmed nor denied the development, but asserted "rumours are being spread that Congress MLAs will break away, when the truth is that JD(U) legislators are under pressure due to voters' anger against them, after their party's switch to the NDA".

"They (JDU) should worry about keeping their flock together," Prakash said. Party leaders from Bihar had met AICC President Mallikarjun Kharge in Delhi, who took stock of the situation in the state, where the latest volte face of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, the JD(U) President, has sent shockwaves in the 'Mahagathbandhan' as well as the opposition INDIA bloc.

Congress has 19 MLAs in the state assembly out of whom 16 had turned up at the meeting, which was also attended by state Congress President Akhilesh Prasad Singh and MLCs Prem Chandra Mishra and Madan Mohan Jha.

A party official in Bihar, who requested anonymity, said, "Those who did not turn up in Delhi included Avidur Rehman, the MLA from Araria. But, it is well known that he is busy taking care of his daughter who has been very unwell of late".

However, the absentees also included Manohar Prasad Singh, the MLA from Manihari who is "expected to reach Hyderabad by Monday" and Siddharth Saurav, who represents the Bikram assembly constituency, and is known to be at daggers drawn with the current state leadership.

CPI(ML) Liberation Dipankar Bhattacharya, whose party is the third largest constituent of the grand alliance, told PTI over phone: "I am not aware of Congress MLAs being flown in to Hyderabad. But even if that is the case, it comes as no surprise in view of the BJP's style of functioning". *—PTI*

Chhagan Bhujbal and Devendra Fadnavis *PHOTO: PTI*

Bhujbal's resignation is not accepted: Fadnavis

MUMBAI, 4 FEB

Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis has said the resignation of senior OBC leader and state cabinet minister Chhagan Bhujbal has not been accepted.

This was after Bhujbal disclosed that he tendered his resignation from the state cabinet last November.

"The Chief Minister will be able to clarify on this, but I can only say as of now that Bhujbal's resignation has not been accepted by the chief minister or me," added Fadnavis. Addressing a rally, Bhujbal, has accused the state government of facilitating "backdoor entry" of the Maratha community into the OBC quota. "Many leaders from the opposition, even leaders from my government say that I should resign. Someone said Bhujbal should be sacked from the cabinet," the senior OBC leader noted. "I want to tell leaders from the opposition, government, and my party that ahead of the OBC Elgar rally held in Ambad on 17 November, I resigned from the cabinet on 16 November and then went to attend that event," he added. "There is no need for sacking. I have tendered my resignation. I will fight for the OBCs till the end." Bhujbal's remarks come against the backdrop of the demand from some sections for his resignation as food and civil supplies minister as he has been criticising the state government over its handling of the Maratha quota demand.

> **I can only say as of now that Bhujbal's resignation has not been accepted by the chief minister or me**
>
> -Devendra Fadnavis, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister

While OBCs constitute 54-60 per cent of the state population, SC/STs 20 per cent and Brahmins 3 per cent, yet all MLAs and MPs are scared of losing Maratha votes. Bhujbal claimed OBC MLAs don't even help in funding rallies let alone participating in them. *—PTI*

ROADSHOW HELD

Modi unveils projects worth ₹11,600 crore in Assam

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday rolled out development projects worth Rs 11,600 crore in Assam.

He also held a roadshow in Guwahati. The infrastructure projects, some funded by the state government and some by the Centre, were unveiled at a function at the Veterinary College Playground in Khanapara in Guwahati. Some of the major projects for which foundation stones were laid were the Kamakhya temple corridor, the six-lane road from the new airport terminal in Guwahati, the upgradation of Nehru Stadium to FIFA standards and a new sports complex in Chandrapur.

The second edition of 'Asom Mala' roads was also kick-started by the PM. This phase will comprise upgrading and constructing 43 new roads with 38 concrete bridges, entailing a total investment of Rs 3,444 crore.

Besides, he laid the foundation stone for an integrated new building of the Gauhati Medical College and Hospital.

He also laid the foundation stones for the proposed Karimganj Medical College and Hospital, which will be constructed at a cost of Rs 578 crore, and the Rs 297-crore Unity Mall in Guwahati. Modi inaugurated the four-lane road from Biswanath Chariali to Gohpur, developed at a cost of Rs 1,451 crore, and another four-lane road from Dolabari to Jamuguri. *—PTI*

Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone for an integrated new building of the Gauhati Medical College and Hospital *PHOTO: PTI*

UCC draft gets U'khand Cabinet approval

DEHRADUN, 4 FEB

The Uttarakhand cabinet has approved the final draft of the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), paving the way for its tabling in the state Assembly during a special four-day session that begins on Monday.

The state cabinet passed the UCC draft at a meeting chaired by Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami at his official residence on Sunday. The special session of the Assembly has been convened especially to pass the legislation on the UCC and make it an Act. The cabinet approval of the draft was needed for its introduction in the Assembly.

If UCC is implemented, BJP-ruled Uttarakhand will become the first state in the country after Independence to adopt it. A UCC has been operational in Goa since the days of the Portuguese rule.

A UCC for Uttarakhand was a major election promise by Dhami in the 2022 assembly polls. The final draft of the UCC running into 740 pages in four volumes was submitted to Chief Minister Dhami here recently by a five-member panel headed by retired judge of the Supreme Court Ranjana Prakash Desai.

The special session of the Assembly, starting on Monday, will go on till 8 February. *—PTI*

ATISHI SERVED NOTICE OVER MLA 'POACHING' ALLEGATION

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

Delhi Police Crime Branch served notice to Finance Minister Atishi's on Sunday. This was in connection with allegations that the BJP was attempting to 'poach' Aam Aadmi Party's MLAs.

According to the notice, the Crime Branch has asked Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and Atishi to give information on the allegations of poaching levelled against the BJP. Statements by them suggest they were "privy to certain information regarding commission of a cognizable offence". They have been asked to respond to the notice by 5 February.

AAP leader Jasmine Shah said the notice does not include anything about a summon or an FIR.

Should the Delhi ministers always stay at their homes to personally receive each and every delivery?" Shah said, adding that police officers had waited five hours before giving the notice to an official of the CMO. *—PTI*

K'taka on alert after 2 monkey fever deaths

BENGALURU, 4 FEB

Two people have succumbed to Kyasanur Forest Disease so far in Karnataka this year.

This has prompted Health department officials to hold meetings and review the preparedness to tackle spread of the viral infection.

According to the Health department, the first death due to KFD, commonly known as monkey fever was reported in Hosanagara taluk of Shivamogga district on 8 January, and the second death was reported at Manipal in Udupi district.

So far, the state has witnessed 49 positive cases of monkey fever with a maximum of 34 cases being reported in Uttara Kannada district followed by 12 in Shivamogga and the remaining three in Chikkamangaluru district.

Karnataka's Health and Family Welfare Commissioner, D Randeep, along with a team of senior officials from the state Health department reviewed the preparedness to tackle the spread of the viral infection. *—PTI*

INCLUDES UBER, OLA

Karnataka fixes uniform fare for taxis

BENGALURU, 4 FEB

City taxis and those operating through app-based aggregators like Uber and Ola will now have to follow the new fare structure announced by the Karnataka Transport Department on Saturday.

Fares for app-based cab aggregators as well as city taxis would be uniform and the revised fares would be applicable across the state with immediate effect.

According to the new fare structure, cabs have been categorised into three classes based on the cost of the vehicle.

For vehicles whose purchase cost is Rs 10 lakh or below, the minimum fare has been fixed at Rs 100 for up to four km with a charge of Rs 24 for every additional km. For those costing between Rs 10 lakh and Rs 15 lakh, the minimum fare is Rs 115, and per km cost Rs 28. For those costing above 15 lakh, minimum fare is set at Rs 130 with Rs 32 charged for each additional kilometre.

The order clearly states that no cab aggregators will be allowed to collect extra charges. As for waiting charge, the first five minutes is free, after which passengers would be charged Rs 1 for every minute.

App-based aggregators can collect five per cent GST as well as toll charges from the passengers, the new order states. For cabs booked between 12am and 6am, operators can charge an extra 10 per cent. *—PTI*

Cabs have been categorised into three classes *PHOTO: PTI*

BJP WANTS US TO JOIN: KEJRIWAL

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday claimed that the BJP had been trying to compel him and other Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leaders to join the party and asserted they would not do so as they had done no wrong. BJP dismissed his claim as an attempt to "distract and trick" the people of Delhi.

Kejriwal's remarks come at a time he has been asked to join the Delhi Police probe into his allegations that BJP attempted to "poach" AAP MLAs and is facing summons from the Enforcement Directorate. "I am standing firm against them and I am not going to bow down," he said. *—PTI*
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PHOTO: SALAR

SI, constable face action for harassing student

GADAG, 4 FEB

A head constable was suspended and a probe was launched against a sub-inspector for allegedly harassing a college student at Gajendragad taluk in Gadag district. District Superintendent of Police BS Nemagowda took action against PSI Nikhil Kamble and Head Constable Shankar Nalakar of Naregal Police Station for misusing their powers. Expressing fear for her life, the college student accused PSI Kamble of harassing her near Naregal bus stand and police station. The girl said Head Constable Nalakar sent obscene messages to her, threatening to disclose her contact information to other students. A case has been registered against the duo and the SP assured a thorough investigation into the matter to ensure justice for the victim. *—Salar News*

Woman assaulted by tenant over dog dispute

BENGALURU, 4 FEB

A woman in Jeevan Bhima Nagar was assaulted by her flat owner following a disagreement over keeping a dog. The flat owner objected to the woman keeping the dog in the apartment, but the tenant refused to comply, according to reports. Matters escalated when the owner demanded the tenant vacate the premises, leading to the altercation. On Saturday late at night, a group of four or five individuals forcibly entered the flat and assaulted the woman. The woman lodged a complaint with Jeevan Bhimanagar police station. However, she claimed that the police did not register an FIR in response to her complaint. *—Salar News*

Youth attacked for failing to repay ₹5,000 loan

CHIKKAMAGALURU, 4 FEB

A young man, Satish, was assaulted by a group of youths over defaulting of loan in Karkeshwar village of Koppa Taluk. The victim, who borrowed the money, faced severe consequences when he failed to repay the debt of Rs 5,000. The lender, infuriated by the non-repayment, orchestrated a merciless attack with the help of accomplices. They tied Satish's hands and feet to a tree while he was in a plantation on Somlapura road in Koppa taluk, unleashing a ruthless beating. The entire incident was captured on video and is now circulating widely on various social media platforms. Satish, suffered significant injuries due to the brutal assault and, he was rushed to Koppa Government Hospital for medical attention. A FIR has been registered against the perpetrators, identified as Mahesh, Vithal, Cyril, Sunil, Manju, and Manju, at the Koppa Police Station. *—Salar News*

BMRCL plans single app for Namma Metro services

BENGALURU, 4 FEB

Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Limited (BMRCL) is set to come up with a single platform for passengers. Using the mobile app, passengers can generate QR-coded tickets, check the status of trains, know the nearest metro station and book last-mile connectivity services. The app can also be used to recharge smart card recharges could also be integrated, further streamlining the process. The new platform will be integrated with ONDC (Open Network for Digital Commerce), Public Relations Officer Shrivas Rajagopalan told Salar News. "Passengers could potentially book bikes, autos, and metro rides on a single platform, simplifying multi-modal journeys," he said. *—Salar News*

City lakes turn into dumping grounds for garbage

Since 2018, Kasturinagar residents have been grappling with toxic fumes

VAISHNAVI GOLPALRAJ
BENGALURU, 4 FEB

Despite residents bringing attention to the issue through notifications to BBMP, the problem continues to escalate **PHOTOS: SALAR**

The once-serene and tranquil Channasandra and Chunchanghatta lakes in City have become distressing sites as they transform into illegal dumping and burning grounds for garbage. Despite repeated notifications to the authorities, the problem has persisted for months, causing significant concerns among residents.

Despite residents bringing attention to the issue through notifications to the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) and by posting it on social media, the problem continues to escalate. Since 2018, residents in Kasturinagar area have been grappling with toxic fumes as the trash continues to burn in the dried-up Channasandra lake. Recently, the situation escalated to the point where residents had to call firefighters to douse the flames.

Speaking to Salar News, MS Sriharsha, a resident of Kasturinagar, expressed their frustration, stating, "The garbage is burnt regularly on the dried-up Channasandra Lake, and last week, so much smoke and fire developed that we had to call firefighters to douse it. We tried to involve the police, but the lack of clarity on monitoring CCTV systems in the vicinity has left law enforcement clueless. Local authorities, including the BBMP, are yet to provide a comprehensive response to the repeated pleas from residents."

Chunchanghatta Lake is also facing pollution issues, with untreated water flow and garbage disposal causing harm to the ecosystem. Despite complaints filed with the Bangalore Sewerage and Water Supply Board (BSWBB), the situation remains dire, with dead fish and garbage accumulating in the lake. Raghavendra Pachhapur a resident near the lake, said, " The untreated water has flowing to the lake from last year, but no authorities have been responding."

When Salar News interacted with resident associations in Bengaluru East, a common thread emerged revealing similar challenges faced by lakeside properties due to the pollution in the waterbodies. Doddakallasandra Lake is similarly grappling with pollution issues caused by borewell slits and arsenic-laden water entering the lake, and every day, the garbage dump gets burned on the lake premises.

Ramchandra, a lake activist in the City, said burning waste near the lakes releases toxic pollutants into the air, posing severe health risks. The compromised air quality not only affects the residents but also undermines the purpose of visiting the lakes, which is to enjoy fresh air during walks or leisure time. *—Salar News*

'CHECK YOUR ENTHUSIASM'

Hindus should have thoughtful discourse: RSS

BENGALURU, 4 FEB

Mohan Bhagwat **PHOTO: PTI**

Hindus should have thoughtful discourse rather than showing excessive enthusiasm by hailing Jai Shri Ram, said Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) Chief Mohan Bhagwat here on Sunday.

"Now, there is a need for Hindus to have thoughtful discourse and speak with wisdom rather than exhibiting excessive enthusiasm," Bhagwat said at All India Kala Sadhak Sangam organised by RSS-affiliate Sanskar Bharati here.

Bhagwat noted the return of India's "self" with the completion of the newly-built Ram Temple in Ayodhya. Reflecting on India's 75 years of independence, he said the rise of 'swa' (self) in 'swatantra' (independence) took time to manifest in the form of widespread self-esteem among the masses.

The RSS Chief said there is a need to strengthen India's cultural roots and position its art prominently on the global stage. "Earlier, art was used to achieve popularity and alter the culture of the society. But sometimes, art is now used to spread bad culture and Sanskar Bharat has to get ready for that as well," the RSS Chief said.

RSS organises All India Kala Sadhak Sangam across the country to showcase and promote Indian art. This year, the event was held in Bengaluru's Art of Living centre and it featured around 500 artists across the State and 50 art stalls. Artistic expressions from across the country, ranging from Kirtan of West Bengal to Odissi dance of Odisha and Dollu Kunitha dance of Karnataka to Manipur's Lai Haraoba were showcased at the event.

- Arun Yograj, the creator of 'Ram Lalla' idol installed at Ram Temple in Ayodhya, and GL Bhat, another sculptor responsible for crafting the idol of Lord Ram, were honoured

Arun Yograj, the creator of 'Ram Lalla' idol installed at Ram Temple in Ayodhya, and GL Bhat, another sculptor responsible for crafting the idol of Lord Ram, were honoured during the event which saw a participation of around 2000 attendees.

Laxman S, an RSS member from Maharashtra, said the construction of the Ram Mandir had brought Hindus together. "This triumph is not just ours; it is a victory resonating with Hindus worldwide. It feels as if Lord Shri Ram has finally returned to Ayodhya, his home, after many years of struggle," Laxman told Salar News. *—Salar News*

BJP protests outside DK Suresh's home

BENGALURU, , 4 FEB

BJP members gathered outside the residence of Congress MP DK Suresh here on Sunday to protest his statement that southern states would be forced to demand a separate nation if the 'injustice' in the distribution of funds is not rectified by Centre. Protesters were heard shouting slogans 'Vande Mataram', 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai', 'down down DK Suresh' outside his residence in Sadashivanagar here. However, the agitators were soon removed from the spot by the police and shifted into a bus, police said. "The protesters were taken into custody and the situation is under control," a senior police officer said.

BJP State General Secretary P Rajeev said, " A person who makes an unconstitutional,nation-breaking statement is safe but people protesting against such people are being brutally attacked by police." Rajeev said Suresh's statement threatens the unity and integrity of the nation. Suresh is the brother of Deputy Chief Minister and State Congress President DK Shivakumar. Suresh, who represents Bengaluru Rural Lok Sabha constituency, had also alleged that Hindi was being 'imposed' on South India in every aspect.

Reacting to the protests, Suresh said in a democracy everyone has the right to protest and freedom of speech.

Accusing BJP of trying to 'distort' his statement, the lone Lok Sabha member of Congress in Karnataka said, "I never said this country has to be divided, they (BJP) are moving in that direction, they are trying to do politics." *—PTI/Salar News*

CANWALK-2024

Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao with actors, doctors and others at CANWALK-2024, to create awareness on cancer, in Bengaluru on Sunday **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

CANCER AWARENESS WALKATHON HELD IN THE CITY

BENGALURU, 4 FEB

Department of Health and Family Welfare organized Can Walk- 2024 to commemorate World Cancer Day on Sunday.

The event was conducted in collaboration with Navodyans in Bangalore, the Surgical Society of Bangalore and Sankalpa Chase Cancer Foundation to raise awareness about Cancer.

Health Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao inaugurated the event. The walkathon event was held at Sree Kanteerava Stadium.

Over 5000 officials, participated in the event. *—Salar News*

STATE BJP DIDN'T SEEK CENTRE'S HELP FOR DROUGHT: DKS

BENGALURU, 4 FEB

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar on Sunday said State BJP leaders were speaking against Congress government without holding a single meeting with BJP Central leaders to discuss the drought in Karnataka.

BJP did not talk to the Central government about the welfare of the State. Now they are saying the State government did not provide drought relief, Shivakumar said. "Our government led by Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has put Rs 2,000 in each farmer's account. Along with this, we have taken steps to solve the problem of drinking water," the KPCC Chief said. Shivakumar said Rs 5,300 crore which has been allocated in last year's State budget has not been released. *—Salar News*

BJP, JD(S) and Sangh Parivar workers have started the campaign **PHOTO: SALAR**

Mandya: BJP, JD(S) hoist Hanuman flags

MANDYA, 4 FEB

BJP, JD(S) and Sangh Parivar workers have started a campaign to hoist Hanuman flags on houses at Keragodu village in Mandya district. The flag was hoisted at more than 300 houses in the village as part of the campaign which was launched to protest against the replacement of a saffron flag from a 108-foot-tall flagpole in the village with the national flag. The campaign at Keragodu and nearby villages will continue till 9 February after which, it will be extended across the State, said Bhanuprakash Sharma, the president of Vishwa Hindu Parishad district unit.

Challenging the Congress government's decision to remove the flag, Indresh Kumar, BJP district unit president, said if they had the strength, they should clear the flags flown on houses. A peace meeting called by Divisional Commissioner Kumar on Friday to resolve the conflict in the village turned futile. Another peace meeting will be called after 9 February. *—Salar News*

GOVT FORMS COMMITTEE TO PROBE LAPSES AT KEONICS

BENGALURU, 4 FEB

State government has constituted an inquiry committee to investigate alleged financial irregularities and violation of certain rules in the procurements by Karnataka State Electronics Development Corporation (KEONICS). The committee was formed following the report by Comptroller Auditor General (CAG) on the procurements during the previous BJP government's tenure.

The committee consists of retired IAS officers and is headed by SD Meena, a retired IAS officer. The committee will make observations of the Compliance Audit of KEONICS for the period 2018-2019 to 2022-2023 and submit a report within six months.

IT and BT Minister Priyank Kharge said BJP procured IT peripherals at escalated costs ranging from 38 per cent to 1577 per cent. *—Salar News*

By election: Liquor ban from 14 to 17 February

BENGALURU, 4 FEB

As the upcoming byelection for Bengaluru Teachers Constituency in Karnataka Legislative Council is slated on 16 February, Deputy Commissioner of Bengaluru City, KA Dayananda, has announced a three-day ban on the sale of liquor. The prohibition is effective from 5pm on 14 February to 6am on 17 February in the City.

The decision, made under the authority vested in section 135(c) of the Karnataka Excise (General Clauses of Charters) Rules, 1967, and section 135(c) of the Representation of the People Act, 1967, aims to maintain a peaceful and impartial atmosphere during the byelection. The model code of conduct, already in effect from 16 January to 23 February, covers seven Assembly constituencies in the Bengaluru Urban district: Yelahanka, Battarayana pura, Yeshavantpura, Dasarahalli, Mahadeva pura, Bengaluru South and Anekal.

To address complaints and grievances related to the elections, a 24/7 control room/grievance redressal centre has been established in the Office of the Collector of Bengaluru City, a statement said. Voters, the public, and associations are encouraged to submit their complaints through helpline 080-22211106 or e-mail at deo.bangaloreu@gmail.com. Complaints can also be lodged through the official websites of the office and social media platforms.

The byelection will see a contest between BJP-JD(S) alliance candidate AP Ranganath and Congress' Puttanna.

The election, scheduled for 16 February, will see voting from 8am to 4pm, with the counting of votes set for 20 February. *—Salar News*

SAY NOT TO DRUGS, YES TO JOBS

More companies turn to dope tests before hiring

DANIEL GEORGE
BENGALURU, 4 FEB

PHOTO: PTI

If you abuse drugs and have applied for a job in IT or health-related companies and have undergone a drug test, be rest assured you will not land that job as companies in City are increasingly filtering out substance abusers from job aspirants.

With the City grappling with the rising problem of drug abuse, employers are becoming more concerned about the impact on employee performance. "No company wants an employee impaired by drugs affecting project outcomes," said Gangadhar Kamath, an HR professional in the City. "If the applicant fails a drug test, the job offer is immediately withdrawn," Kamath said.

In some instances, drug testing policies are client-specific, said Amandeep Biswas, an HR professional at a company in the City. "The job applicant is required to have a drug test as per the agreement with clients. Most banking and finance system-related clients demand their developers/resources to appear for drug tests. Several companies do random drug tests when an employee is slacking at work, and this is done based on the inputs by the HR team which monitors employees who are suspected drug users," Biswas said.

Major IT companies such as Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Infosys and Cognizant conduct a pre-screening drug test before taking candidates on board, industry insiders, who did not wish to be named, said. Ocwen Financial Solutions Private Limited located at Ambalipura Village, Varthur in Hobli Taluk of the City's outskirts also insists on drug tests of employees. If a company asks for a urine sample during recruitment, then it is surely for a drug test, sources said.

A reformed drug user who failed a drug test in an MNC in the City said: "I used drugs a week before my job interview. Little did I know that they would ask me to undergo a drug test and I failed it. I am dreading about my future," the 26-year-old, who did not wish to be named, said.

Besides drug tests, what is necessary is giving these users who have kicked the habit a chance to return to mainstream society, said Cecil George, CEO at Blossoms Convalescent Care, which helps substance abusers come out of the addiction. "What would that person do if companies shun him or her away? What future does that person have without a job or employment," George said.

Most tests pick up traces of drugs from urine, saliva, blood and hair. Heroin will leave a trace in urine for 1-3 days while cocaine will show in urine for 2-3 days. Marijuana/THC will be detected in urine tests for 1-7 days and meth for 2-3 days. Methylenedioxyme thamphetamine or MDMA will be detected in urine for 2-4 days.

Karnataka recorded 4,484 cases under Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act in 2023, according to the police. Among those, 2,584 cases were for cultivated or processed drugs, and 1,900 cases were reported for synthetic drugs. More than 400 cases are recorded in the City every month under NDPS Act. *—Salar News*

DRUG NAME	SALIVA	BLOOD	URINE	HAIR
Heroin	1 DAY	5 - 24 HOURS	1 - 2 DAYS	3 MONTHS
Marijuana	3 DAYS	1-2 DAYS	3 DAYS	3 MONTHS
Cocaine	2 DAYS	2 DAYS	3 - 14 DAYS	3 MONTHS
Meth	2 DAYS	25 HOURS	1 - 5 DAYS	3 MONTHS
Adderall	20 - 50 HOURS	46 HOURS	2 - 3 DAYS	3 MONTHS
Fentanyl	N/A	5 - 48 HOURS	1 - 3 DAYS	3 MONTHS
Hydrocodone	12 - 36 HOURS	1 DAY	4 DAYS	3 MONTHS
Oxycodone	1 - 4 HOURS	1 DAY	3 - 4 DAYS	3 MONTHS
LSD	12 - 24 HOURS	6 - 12 HOURS	8 HOURS	6 MONTHS
MDMA	1 - 2 DAYS	1 - 2 DAYS	1 - 3 DAYS	3 MONTHS

Oppn: Congress should solve INDIA bloc issues

'It should show large-heartedness in seat sharing'

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

The Congress should take the lead in resolving differences of opinion within the INDIA bloc and show "large-heartedness" in seat sharing to emerge as a viable alternative to the BJP in upcoming elections, according to some Opposition leaders.

They also said the Opposition should take this election "very seriously" and present a united face before the people by coming up with a common minimum programme soon.

Shiv Sena (UBT) MP Priyanka Chaturvedi agreed that seat-sharing talks have been delayed, but she was hopeful that things will be set right soon and allocation of seats will be announced in most states.

"I would continue to say, like the TMC would say, that the Congress would have to show more large-heartedness, considering that we are fighting the battle of our lives, not our lives but of the millions and billions that matter in this country," Chaturvedi told PTI.

Shiv Sena (UBT) MP Priyanka Chaturvedi said she was hopeful that things will be set right soon in INDIA bloc **PHOTO: PTI**

On seat-sharing in Maharashtra, she said, "I am very confident that things would move smoothly". She said the decision on most seats has been taken, barring a few, and asserted that the list of seats would be "released soon".

Amid a public spat between leaders of the Congress and Trinamool Congress (TMC), Chaturvedi said though seat-sharing has not happened in West Bengal, the TMC continues to be part of the INDIA bloc and Mamata Banerjee is in the most "confident position" to defeat the BJP.

"These are not mere words. Her actions have spoken and her winnability has spoken," she said, adding that Banerjee is confident about being able to defeat the BJP and is part of the INDIA alliance.

TMC supremo and West Bengal Chief Minister Banerjee had lashed out at the Congress for taking out the 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' through her state.

CPI general secretary D Raja said that the INDIA alliance must have "mutual trust and be mutually accommodative" after drawing proper lessons from the assembly elections in five states held last year.

NK Premachandran of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) said the opposition has to be more serious in terms of seat-sharing discussions and the state-wise political elections strategy. —*PTI*

Gujarat: Ex-Cong MLA Chirag Patel joins BJP

AHMEDABAD, 4 FEB

Former Congress MLA Chirag Patel joined the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in Gujarat on Sunday. Patel, a first-time MLA from Khambhat seat in Anand district, resigned as member of the state assembly on 14 December, 2023 after citing disappointment with the working style of the Congress leadership and alleging groupism in the party's state unit.

State BJP Chief CR Paatil, who is also a MP, inducted Patel into the party fold. Paatil indicated that Patel might be the BJP's candidate from Khambhat seat for the by-election, necessitated after his resignation. Chirag Patel, in his speech, said he has joined the BJP to participate in the task undertaken by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel and state BJP head Paatil to make the country and the state prosperous and united. -PTI

BJP MLA Ganpat booked for casteist abuse

THANE, 4 FEB

Maharashtra BJP MLA Ganpat Gaikwad has been booked in a Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes Act case on Sunday. He is also an accused in shooting and injuring a Shiv Sena leader and one more person inside a police station in Ulhasnagar in Thane district. "On the complaint of a resident of Dwarli village, Gaikwad and seven others have been charged under sections of the Indian Penal Code and SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act," for being subjected to caste-based abuse on 31 January. Gaikwad had pumped six bullets into Kalyan Shiv Sena leader Mahesh Gaikwad and also injured the latter's associate Rahul Patil late Friday night inside the cabin of the Hill Line police station. The three-time Kalyan East MLA has been charged with attempt to murder and other offences in the case. —*PTI*

RaGa: Cong stood for Jal, jungle, Jamin of tribals

DHANBAD, 4 FEB

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Sunday said that his party stood for 'Jal-Jungle-Jamin' (water, forest and land) of tribal people and employment of youths. After a night halt in Tundi block of the district on Saturday, the yatra resumed at Govindpur in city on Sunday, the third day of his yatra in Jharkhand. The main objective of the yatra is to save public sector units from being sold to private parties and ensure justice to employed youths and tribal of the country, Gandhi said. Dhanbad city on Sunday, the third day of his yatra in Jharkhand. The main objective of the yatra is to save public sector units from being sold to private parties and ensure justice to employed youths and tribal of the country, he said.—*PTI*

Maha CM Eknath Shinde supports simultaneous polls

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

Shiv Sena leader and Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde has supported the concept of simultaneous polls, saying frequent elections are not good for the economy and hamper growth.We strongly believe that 'one nation, one election' will lead to focused and smooth governance. With elections going on in some part or other of the country it becomes very difficult to concentrate on governance as the entire attention is focused in winning these elections," Shinde wrote on a letter. Polls to elect new assemblies in Maharashtra, Haryana and some other states will be held within six months of the Lok Sabha polls. "Huge amounts will be spent on these elections in such a short span of time. We feel that simultaneously elections would drastically reduce election expense not only for the ECI or the government but also of Political parties," said Shinde.—*PTI*

'POACHING CASE'

Development to go on even if I'm jailed: Kejri

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal **PHOTO: PTI**

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said the ongoing developmental works of his government for the people would not stop even if he was sent to jail, on Sunday

Laying the foundation stone of two school buildings at Kirari, he said "Manish Sisodia was put in jail because he built schools, Satyendar Jain was sent to jail because he built Mohalla clinics, but even if you put Kejriwal in jail, the works of schools, clinics and providing free treatment to the people of Delhi will not stop."

Kejriwal alleged that central agencies such as ED and CBI have been unleashed on them (AAP leaders).

His remarks come at a time he has been asked to join the Delhi Police probe into his allegations that the BJP attempted to "poach" AAP MLAs and is facing summons from the Enforcement Directorate in an excise policy linked money laundering case.

"The central government recently presented the Union Budget. It will spend only four per cent of the total budget on health and education. However, the Delhi government has been spending around 40 per cent of its total budget on health and education for the past eight years," he added.

The two schools will come up at Sector 41 in Rohini to benefit the children of densely-populated areas of Kirari village. The schools will come up on two separate plots with more than 100 classrooms. One of the schools will have a fully air-conditioned multi-purpose hall with a 300-seat capacity.

The schools will be equipped with facilities like state-of-the-art laboratories, libraries, offices, staff rooms, activity rooms and toilet blocks on every floor, and a lift.

The BJP wants us to join their party but we will not bow down," he said, adding that the prayers of Delhi residents have kept them going. —*PTI*

Quota activist Jarange hits out at Bhujbal

CHHATRAPATI SAMBHAJINAGAR, 4 FEB

"Maharashtra Minister Chhagan Bhujbal was trying to 'damage' Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar and Devendra Fadnavis with his statements about the Maratha reservation," said Maratha quota activist Manoj Jarange.

"He doesn't understand anything. There is a law, government, committee and scholars working on this issue, but Bhujbal doubts his own government," said Jarnage.

The minister has accused the state government of facilitating "backdoor entry" of the Maratha community into the OBC quota and claimed that he resigned from the state cabinet in November last year.

Bhujbal, who belongs to the Ajit Pawar-led faction of the NCP, has alleged that the process of gathering data to determine the Maratha community's backwardness through a survey by the state backward classes commission is flawed.

When asked about Bhujbal's alleged appeal to barbers not to offer their services to Marathas, he said, "Bhujbal wants people to die of hunger whether they are Marathas or belong to other castes. The OBCs should become sensible and not empower Bhujbal."

Manoj Jarange **PHOTO: PTI**

> **There is a law, government, committee and scholars working on this issue, but Bhujbal doubts his govt**
>
> -Manoj Jarange, Maratha quota activist

If he wants to resign, he should do it, but should not talk against Maratha reservation," added Jarange.

Bhujbal's revelation of resigning as minister a hogwash: Sanjay Raut

Chhagan Bhujbal who claimed he had resigned in November 2023 over Maratha OBC quota issue, Shiv Sena (UBT) MP Sanjay Raut slammed it as a 'hogwash', on Sunday.

Bhujbal claims he resigned from the cabinet last year but he attended the cabinet meetings after that.

Addressing a rally in Ahmednagar on Saturday, Bhujbal, who has accused the Maharashtra government of facilitating "backdoor entry" of the Maratha community into the Other Backward Class (OBC) quota, said he tendered his resignation from the state cabinet on 16, November, 2023.

Bhujbal, who belongs to the Ajit Pawar-led faction of the NCP, also said he is not opposed to Marathas getting the reservation but is against sharing the existing quota for the OBCs.

"It is said that (Deputy Chief Minister) Devendra Fadnavis is behind Bhujbal's outbursts against handling of the Maratha quota agitation by Manoj Jarange. I will resign but you will not accept it or you resign and we will not accept it," Raut claimed. —*PTI*

'Centre doing fiscal federal terrorism'

KOLKATA, 4 FEB

The ruling Trinamool Congress in West Bengal on Sunday took on the BJP-led government at the Centre, alleging that it was indulging in "fiscal federal terrorism".

TMC MP Derek O'Brien rejected the claims that the West Bengal government did not provide utilisation certificates for central funds and alleged that the Centre was targeting the state as it was ruled by a party opposed to the BJP.

"This is fiscal federal terrorism... it is nothing but another attempt by the BJP to target West Bengal as they are failing to take on TMC politically," he alleged.

Another senior TMC leader, Kunal Ghosh, claimed that there has been no lack or deficit in the submission of utilisation certificates after the TMC came to power in the state in 2011.

"We cannot take responsibility for the period 2002-03 to 2010-11 when the Left Front government was in power," he added.

Amid a war of words with the BJP over CAG report on usage of government funds, CM Mamata Banerjee had earlier said it was "full of lies" and also wrote to PM Narendra Modi over the issue. —*PTI*

Nyay Yatra schedule to be shared: Cong

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

"The yatra's programme in Uttar Pradesh will be shared with INDIA bloc constituents after it's finalised," said Congress on Sunday.

This was shared a day after Samajwadi Party Chief Akhilesh Yadav said he hasn't received an invitation for the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra.

"The problem is that many big events take place, but we don't get an invite," said Yadav when asked if he would participate in the Yatra.

Their participation in the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra will further strengthen the INDIA bloc. The Yatra is expected to enter UP in the afternoon of February 16," said Congress General Secretary, Jairam Ramesh.

The Congress has faced heat recently from Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) constituents such as the TMC which has attacked it over seat sharing and on carrying out the Yatra. TMC supremo and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had stayed away from the yatra while it was in her state.

Akhilesh Yadav **PHOTO: PTI**

The Yatra is in Jharkhand presently and Jharkhand Mukti Morcha leader and newly-elected Chief Minister of the state Champai Soren participated in the yatra on Friday as it entered the state.

The yatra will traverse 6,713km in 67 days, passing through 110 districts in 15 states before culminating in Mumbai on 20 March or 21. —*PTI*

Defacing PM's poster: Youth Cong leader held

NAGPUR, 4 FEB

The police on Sunday arrested Maharashtra Youth Congress president Kunal Raut for allegedly defacing a poster of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Nagpur, an official said.

The incident took place near the Zilla Parishad office here on Saturday, said the official from Sadar police station. Kunal Raut is also the son of former state energy minister and Congress leader Nitin Raut.

The Youth Congress leader and a few others allegedly defaced a poster of PM Modi with black paint, erased "Modi Sarkar" on it and wrote "Bharat Sarkar", he said.

Raut was arrested from Kuhi town, about 40km from Nagpur, on Sunday, the official said.

However, a Congress leader claimed that Raut was arrested abruptly.

He said a notice was issued to the Youth Congress leader, via WhatsApp, under Section 41-A of CrPC on Sunday, instructing Raut to appear before police at noon on Monday. But he was taken into custody on Sunday itself. —*PTI*

Kunal Raut **PHOTO: X**

- Youth Congress workers allegedly defaced a poster of Modi with paint, erased "Modi Sarkar" and wrote "Bharat Sarkar"

AKHILESH YADAV RENEWS PITCH FOR 'PDA'

LUCKNOW, 4 FEB

Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav said 91 per cent of the backward people, Dalits and minorities will vote unitedly for the PDA. This could be the reason why BJP's equation and previous formulas have failed this time.

PDA is the term coined by Yadav for "Pichde, Dalit and Alpsankhyaks" (backward, Dalit and minorities) for which the Samajwadi Party is batting for in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

"Survey of those who believe in PDA: Overall 90% say-- 49 per cent backward people, 16 per cent Dalits, 21 per cent minorities(Muslims+Sikhs+Buddhists+Christians+Jains and others+Tribals), 4 per cent 'agde' (upper caste) have confidence in PDA. (All the above include 'aadhi abadi' (women).

Due to PDA, the BJP has lagged far behind in the selection of the candidates, as no one is willing to fight to lose by taking the BJP ticket, said Yadav.

"The women, who are among the main supporters of the BJP, are ashamed of because of the plight of the women wrestlers, the gruesome incident in Manipur, the incident of mother-daughter being burnt to death and countless other incidents of insult to women, they are not with BJP this time," he added. He said there was an anti-BJP wave among the farmers. —*PTI*

ELECTION MODE ON

BJP leader and Lok Sabha election in-charge for Madhya Pradesh Mahendra Singh during the launch of the party's election campaign, in Bhopal, on Sunday. **PHOTO: PTI**

MAHA SHOOTING CASE: 40 BJP WORKERS HELD

THANE, 4 FEB

Police have booked at least 40 supporters of BJP MLA Ganpat Gaikwad, arrested for shooting at and injuring a Shiv Sena leader, for violating prohibitory orders by gathering outside a court in Thane district, an official said on Sunday.

Police have issued orders banning gatherings in Ulhasnagar in view of the simmering tension following the shooting incident inside a police station on Friday night that left Sena leader Mahesh Gaikwad critically wounded.

According to police, Ganpat Gaikwad's supporters gathered outside a court on Saturday evening and raised slogans when he was brought there.

Police have identified 11 people in the case. —*PTI*

BJP to launch campaign to woo minorities

LUCKNOW, 4 FEB

The minority front of the BJP is all set to organise 'Quami Chaupal' in more than 4,100 villages.

The campaign is to seek and connect with voters of the minority community in Muslim- dominated Lok Sabha constituencies of western Uttar Pradesh.

The campaign will start on 10 February from Kaserwa village of Muzaffarnagar district.

The BJP's Minority Morcha will depute Lok Sabha constituency-wise in-charge for the 'Qaumi Chaupal' programme to be organised in 23 Lok Sabha constituencies of Western Uttar Pradesh.

Leaders of the Morcha will visit the Muslim-dominated villages and discuss various schemes of the government and the work done by the government for the minorities.

The Morcha will also seek to understand the various issues and problems faced by the community.

Ali said the main objective is to connect more and more Muslims with the BJP. These chaupals will be organised in the homes of eminent persons of the village or in madrassas.

Ali said the Morcha's 'Shukriya Modi Bhai Jaan' programme is also going on, but it is especially focused on Muslim women.

Qaumi Chaupal is an exercise to reach out to the predominantly male voters and connect them with the BJP.

In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP had won 19 out of 26 Lok Sabha seats in Western Uttar Pradesh, while the alliance of Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party got seven seats. This time the BJP is working on a strategy of winning all the 80 Lok Sabha seats of Uttar Pradesh. —*PTI*

JMM FOUNDATION DAY

BJP framed Hemant in false cases: J'khand CM

DHANBAD, 4 FEB

Jharkhand Chief Minister Champai Soren on Sunday accused the BJP of framing his predecessor Hemant Soren in false cases to continue the loot of minerals from the state.

Addressing a party workers' rally on the occasion of the 52nd foundation day of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) at the Golf Ground in Dhanbad, Champai Soren also alleged that the BJP and outsiders were engaged in looting minerals of the state for 19 years in the state.

"When Hemant Soren came to power (in 2019) and stopped them from doing so, they framed him in false cases," the Chief Minister claimed.

Senior JMM leader Champai Soren became the Chief Minister on 2 February, two days after Hemant Soren's resignation as the chief minister on Januaryfollowing a marathon interrogation by the ED in a money laundering case linked to an alleged land fraud, and his subsequent arrest.

Hemant Soren **PHOTO: PTI**

"Hemant Soren had initiated steps to ensure the rights of tribal through 1932 Khatiyan based domicile policy and 75 per cent job reservation for local youths in private companies. The BJP could not digest these and they used central agencies against him," the Jharkhand Chief Minister alleged.

Making 1932 the cut-off year for the domicile policy will help descendants of those, who were living in present-day Jharkhand before that year, avail benefits in various schemes and get government jobs. —*PTI*

PHOTO: PIXABAY

India records 188 new cases of Covid-19

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

India has recorded 188 new cases of Covid, while the number of active cases of the infection stood at 1,473, the health ministry said on Sunday.No deaths have been reported in a span of 24 hours, according to the ministry's data updated at 8 am.The number of daily cases had dropped to double-digits till 5 December , 2023 but cases had begun to increase after emergence of a new variant and cold weather conditions.After 5 December, 2023 a maximum of 841 new cases were reported on 31 December , 2023 which was 0.2 per cent of the peak cases reported in May 2021, official sources said. *—PTI*

MP man kills 5-yr-old after fight over tobacco

SHAHDOL, 4 FEB

A man allegedly hacked his five-year-old nephew to death with an axe and injured his sister-in-law after she did not give him tobacco at their home in Madhya Pradesh's Shahdol district, police said on Sunday.The police have arrested the accused, Ramla Kol,30, for the incident that occurred in Barkachh village under Beohari police station limits on Saturday night, an official said.Kol had asked for tobacco from Sukkhi Bai,35, his elder brother's wife, but she denied his request saying she did not have the substance at home, Beohari police station in-charge Mohan Padwar said.Angered by this, the accused broke into the woman's house at 11 pm, attacked the woman and her son.*—PTI*

Himachal fire tragedy: 4 of 5 deceased identified

SHIMLA, 4 FEB

In the Himachal's perfume manufacturing unit fire, four of the five deceased in the Baddi industrial area of Solan have been identified and all were women, officials on Sunday said. The injured woman, who was declared dead on Friday by the PGIMER Chandigarh was identified as Pinki, while three of the four bodies recovered from the factory ashes on Saturday were identified as Rahnuma, Shashi and Rakhi respectively.So far, five people have been killed in the massive fire that broke out around 2.45pm on Friday and the search for missing four persons is underway.Solan Deputy Commissioner Manmohan Sharma had on Saturday morning said that 13 people were missing."People jumped from the first and second floors of the building to save their lives and sustained multiple injuries on hands, legs and even spine," Sharma said. *—PTI*

Prez to attend 200th birth anniversary of Dayanand Saraswati

MORBI, 4 FEB

President Droupadi Murmu will on 12 February attend an event to be organised by the Arya Samaj to mark the 200th birth anniversary of its founder Maharshi Dayanand Saraswati at his birth place Tankara in Gujarat's Morbi district, the organisers said on Sunday.Murmu will be the chief guest at the event on 12 February and address the Arya Samaj members who will gather in a large number from all over the world for the celebration to be organised from 10 to 12 February, said a release by a committee organising the event.Prime Minister Narendra Modi will virtually address the event on 11 February, it said.Gujarat Governor Acharya Devvrat and Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel will attend the inaugural event on 10 February. *—PTI*

India in driver seat of Quad, says Eric Garcetti

Quad is a partnership of India, the US, Australia & Japan

JAIPUR, 4 FEB

The 53-year-old Eric Garcetti said the Quad can be the 'model for the world' as it is 'very strong and stable' PHOTO: ANI

US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti said India is in the "driving seat" of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), while America is in the seat next to it with the "corrective steering wheel", and added that it is up to India to "forcefully define" the nature of the diplomatic partnership.

Garcetti, speaking here at the 17th edition of Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF), used a rather unique analogy of 'eating, drinking and sharing a ride together' to explain the different roles of member countries in the Quad.

The Quad is a diplomatic partnership between India, the US, Australia, and Japan to deepen economic, diplomatic, and military ties among the four countries.

"India is very much in the driver seat of the Quad... may be America is in the next seat with the corrective steering wheel, I think Japan has been an avid navigator from the beginning and Australia is really excited to be back in the car and asking if everybody has enough to drink and eat, and where we are going.

- Though he admitted that the Quad is not a group where the four member countries agree on every vote in multilateral institutions, Garcetti asserted it is not a "talk shop" either

"So it is a great time and we love these different roles. I want to sit in the back some other time and relax, but it is in some ways up to India to most forcefully define what we want to do with the Quad," said Garcetti on Saturday in a session, "Heart of the Matter: Quad and the new Indo-Pacific Vision".

The 53-year-old said the Quad can be the "model for the world" as it is "very strong and stable", not just in geometry but in diplomacy as well – more than multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (UN), which he claimed "don't have much efficacy".

"Bilaterals are always engaging but the two countries get a little bored of each other when it is just direct," he added.

Though he admitted that the Quad is not a group where the four member countries agree on every vote in multilateral institutions, Garcetti asserted it is not a "talk shop" either. *—PTI*

IN KASHMIR AND HIMACHAL

Avalanche warning on; air, road traffic hit in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, 4 FEB

Snowfall across the Kashmir Valley affected normal life on Sunday with all flights cancelled at Srinagar airport, officials said.The plains of Kashmir saw moderate snowfall, while heavy snowfall has been reported in the higher reaches, they said. Authorities are clearing snow from roads so that vehicular movement is possible, they said. But traffic movement was slow as the roads are slippery.The snowfall has forced the cancellation of all inbound and outbound flights from Srinagar airport for the day.Authorities have issued avalanche warnings for hilly and mountainous areas of Kashmir, urging the residents to avoid unnecessary movement for the next 24 hours.The snowfall has resulted in a rise in the minimum temperatures but the day temperatures have fallen in most places of the valley.As per the MeT department forecast, the weather is expected to improve in Kashmir from Tuesday onwards. Qazigund town in south Kashmir was the warmest place on Saturday, recording a high of 3.2 degrees Celsius. *—PTI*

The plains of Kashmir saw moderate snowfall, while heavy snowfall has been reported in the higher reaches PHOTO: PTI

Snowfall disrupts normal life in HP, over 500 roads blocked

SHIMLA, 4 FEB

A fresh spell of snowfall in Himachal Pradesh has led to closure of 518 roads in the state, officials said on Sunday.The orange warning for snowfall across Himachal Pradesh issued by the local weather office on Saturday evening has been changed to yellow warning of thunderstorms, lightning and hail storm with heavy snow at isolated places on Sunday. said 161 roads have been closed in Shimla followed by 157 in Lahaul and Spiti, 71 in Kullu, 69 in Chamba and 46 in Mandi district. According to the state emergency operation centre, 478 transformers and 567 water supply schemes have been disrupted.There was no significant change in the minimum and maximum temperatures and Kukumseri in Lahaul and Spiti was the coldest at night recording minus 4.9 degree C. *—PTI*

Scuffle at Police Academy: 7 injured in clash of 2 groups

GOLAGHAT, 4 FEB

The scuffle started when two trainees indulged in verbal abuse after one of them brought liquor PHOTO: PTI

At least seven Manipur Police trainees, who were undergoing training at Lachit Borphukan Police Academy in Golaghat district of Assam, were injured when a clash broke out between cadets of two groups, a senior official said on Sunday.

The scuffle started when two trainees indulged in verbal abuse after one of them brought liquor from a local market into the academy in Dergaon around dinner time on Saturday night.This escalated into a full-blown clash between the groups, injuring several of them, a senior official of the academy told PTI."Seven trainees from Manipur were injured as a result of the scuffle. Out of those injured, three were sent to Jorhat Medical College and Hospital for better treatment, while four were released after preliminary medical intervention at the local hospital," he added.Meanwhile, Assam Police Director General of Police (DGP) Gyanendra Pratap Singh said that the scuffle at the Police Academy took place amongst young trainees from Manipur."They've been briefed in no uncertain terms to follow instructions and protocols of training institute from drill to discipline to decorum. No scope would be presented to anyone to deviate from the principles that guide training in our Academy."Any aberrant behaviour would be corrected through tough training measures," he added.Singh also claimed that the scuffle between the trainees broke out over distribution of dinner. *—PTI*

RSS' SISTER ORGANISATION

Volunteers of Rashtra Sevika Samiti, that parallels Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh for men, take part in a 'Path Sanchalan' programme, in Nagpur, on Sunday PHOTO: PTI

NAXALITE KILLED IN CHHATTISGARH ENCOUNTER

RAIPUR, 4 FEB

A Naxalite was killed in a gun battle with security personnel in Chhattisgarh's Sukma district on Sunday, police said.

The exchange of fire took place in a forest between Nagaram and Pantabheji villages under Bheji police station limits during an anti-Naxal operation, he said.

The operation was launched based on inputs about the presence of a member of Konta area committee of Maoists, Sodhi Gajendra, and other leaders of the outlawed outfit along with 15-20 cadres in the forest, he said. After the guns fell silent, the body of a Naxalite, a 12 bore rifle, a pistol and "Maoist-related materials" were recovered from the spot, he said.

The identity of the dead Naxalite is yet to be ascertained, while a search is still underway in the vicinity, the official said. Personnel belonging to District Reserve Guard (DRG), Bastar Fighters – both units of state police – and the 219th battalion of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) were involved in the operation, he added.On Tuesday, three CRPF personnel, including two belonging to its specialised jungle warfare unit CoBRA (Commando Battalions for Resolute Action), were killed and 15 others injured in a gun battle with Naxalites near Tekalgudem village in Sukma district.

At least 15-20 Naxalites fell down after being hit by bullets during the encounter but their colleagues took them deep into the forest, a CoBRA commando who was injured in the attack had said. *—PTI*

Man eats cat flesh for overcoming hunger

MALAPPURAM, 4 FEB

A man hailing from Assam in Kuttippuram in this north Kerala district was found consuming the raw flesh of a cat, after having had no means to consume food for days.

The incident was reported on the premises of a busy bus stand here on Saturday evening

The 27-year-old man hails from Dhubri district inAssam, police said. A senior police officer said the local people found him eating the raw flesh of a dead cat, sitting on the stairway of the bus stand. "After being informed, we visited the spot. When he enquired with him, he said he had not eaten any food for the past five days," the officer told PTI.

He said they bought him some food and he accepted it without any hesitation. But, after some time, he disappeared from the place without telling anyone. "We received information this morning that the youth was found at a local railway station here. So, we rushed to the place and sought details of his whereabouts," he said, based on which they found him. Based on the man's statements, he was a college student in the north-eastern state and reached Kerala on a train in December without informing his family. "He gave us the mobile number of his brother who is working in Chennai. We contacted him and confirmed that the information is correct," the officer said.

- The incident was reported on the premises of a busy bus stand .The 27-year-old man hails from Dhubri district inAssam, police said.ocal people found him eating the raw flesh of a dead cat

After a preliminary medical examination, the man was admitted to a hospital in neighbouring Thrissur. The man seemingly has no physical or mental issues, and he would be handed over to his relatives when they arrive here, police added. *—PTI*

'Misuse of resources spreading like cancer'

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

RSS affiliate Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM) has said the misuse of resources by states to dole out freebies such as free electricity is like a "cancer" in the economy and should be put an end to.

SJM co-convener Ashwani Mahajan said state governments should follow the Centre in adopting fiscal prudence.

In an interview to PTI after the interim Budget for 2024-25, he said, "States were given more resources for development, but they chose to misuse these resources for freebies. This is very unfortunate. This is a kind of contagious disease, which is now causing a kind of cancer to the economy of the country."

He said the misuse of resources meant for development is hampering growth and it is "very unfortunate" that states are becoming "too undisciplined" as far as expenditure is concerned. *—PTI*

Noida boy throws puppy from high-rise, FIR filed

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

Greater Noida Police has registered a case against unknown persons after taking cognisance of a complaint filed by an NGO about a viral video on social media purportedly showing a minor boy throwing a puppy from a high-rise onto the road leading to the month-old dog's demise, officials said on Sunday.

A complaint, filed by People For Animals (PFA) volunteer Surbhi Rawat, highlighted that the boy, aged around 9-10 years and residing in a high-rise tower, was captured in a video purportedly showing him committing the act.

The footage, circulated on social media platforms, purportedly depicted the boy callously picking up the helpless puppy, who was hiding with its siblings in a bush.

The FIR stated that the footage circulated as a reel on a social media platform in the society egging on others to do the same.

The video clip shows that the boy, under alleged monitoring of an adult, ruthlessly picked the nearly month-old puppy, who was hiding in a bush with other siblings. The boy took the puppy towards the road even as the canine kept squealing and unsuccessfully trying to escape from his clutches, the FIR stated.The desperate cries of the puppy did not deter the boy from throwing it from a height resulting in its death, the FIR said.The FIR sought the kid's presentation before the juvenile court and checking of his mental state, the officials said. "In the same society, just days ago, a person had intentionally crushed a puppy under his vehicle. Another puppy was found dead in suspicious circumstances. It was possibly poisoned. An autopsy will be conducted. The reason for such brutal actions against puppies is hatred spewed on the society's Whatsapp group. Kids nowadays have phones and get easily influenced by adults who indulge in fear-mongering and spread hatred towards stray animals throughout the day," Rawat told PTI.

PFA Trustee Ambika Shukla said it was worrying to see a child devoid of any feelings."It reveals a psychopathic tendency that must be dealt with urgently lest we find a monster in our midst. Those who hurt and abuse animals set a dangerous example," she said. *—PTI*

AYODHYA HOSPITAL TALES

The 'other' Sri Ram serving people

AYODHYA,4 FEB

For centuries, people of Ayodhya have been praying to Lord Ram for their well-being but there has been another 'Sri Ram' in the holy city, providing relief and succour to the poor and the sick and healing wounds for more than 120 years.

The Sri Ram Hospital housed in its heritage building, located less than a km away from the newly-built grand Ram Mandir, sits along Ram Path in the heart of the temple town.

An old marble plaque embedded on a wall in the main block bears an inscription - "This hospital built and endowed for the poor of Ajodhia by the Hon'ble Rai Sri Ram Bahadur was begun upon 5th Nov 1900 when the foundation stone was laid by the Hon'ble J Hooper, ICS, Commissioner of Fyzabad Division."

The Sri Ram Hospital housed in its heritage building, located less than a kilometre away from the newly-built grand Ram Mandir PHOTO: PTI

"As it's in Ayodhya and located close to Ram Janmabhoomi site, a very large number of people think it is named after Prabhu Shri Ram. Its founder Sri Ram, was a philanthropist who established this hospital which gets patients from Ayodhya and Faizabad towns, and also from Gonda and Basti districts," the hospital's administrative officer Yash Prakash Singh told PTI here.

Though the hospital is under the Uttar Pradesh government and treatment is free, many people "also think it is a private facility", he said.

Since its inception, the hospital, now officially called Rajkiya Sri Ram Hospital, has served the poor and the needy, and as life comes full circle for Ayodhya with the building of the Ram temple, it is also serving devotees with renewed vigour, in case they need medical aid.The consecration ceremony at the temple took place on January 22 and its doors were opened to the public from January 23 onwards. "On the first day of opening, a devotee who had fainted was brought to our hospital in an ambulance and given medical assistance, other devotees who had complained of breathing issues, or those who had got wounded in the milling crowd were also attended to," Singh said.Singh said the construction of the new temple is a "blessing for Ayodhya" and Sri Ram Hospital has practically witnessed the dramatic changes over the last century or so, from close quarters. *—PTI*

LUNAR NEW YR CELEBRATIONS

Divers perform an underwater lion dance at the KLCC Aquaria ahead of Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on Sunday. The Chinese Lunar New Year falls on 10 February this year, marking the start of the Year of the Dragon, according to the Chinese zodiac
PHOTO: PTI

Corruption is still a major threat as Kyiv asks for aid

Over the past 10 years, since annual corruption perceptions scores have been collated, the country has steadily improved
PHOTO: AP

The latest revelations about corruption in Ukraine tell a complex storey. A scandal has engulfed the Ukrainian ministry of defence, where 1,00,000 mortar shells worth about $40m were paid for but never delivered. But within days of this storey emerging, Ukraine achieved its best-ever ranking in the annual corruption perceptions index complied by Transparency International (TI).

The improved standing in the TI index demonstrates that efforts by Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy to crack down on corruption – including in his inner circle – have led to some improvements. On the other hand, the ammunition scandal is a clear indication of how pervasive and normalised corruption has become when senior defence officials and managers of an arms supplier collude to deprive their country of vital military supplies at a time when their country is facing an existential crisis.

Corruption has long been a problem in Ukraine. But over the past ten years, since annual corruption perceptions scores have been collated, the country has steadily improved. Yet, with the exception of Russia and Azerbaijan, no other European country is perceived as more corrupt than Ukraine.

Ukraine has survived two years of bitter conflict, despite this endemic corruption, and has showed remarkable resilience in the face of Russia's aggression. But these high-profile scandals – and the general perception that Ukraine still battles everyday corruption – have become more existential threats at a time when Ukraine's survival has, to a large extent, become dependant on the continued supply of western military and financial aid.

Sceptics in the EU – above all Hungary and Slovakia, but also influential right-wing populists currently in opposition like Germany's AfD – have used undeniable corruption as one argument against further aid for Ukraine. Similarly, in the United States, Republicans have argued that a lack of oversight could mean that US aid is diverted to line the pockets of corrupt officials.

As this debate becomes more heated and increasingly entangled with election campaigns for the European parliament and the US presidency, any alleged evidence of the misuse of funds makes it harder for Kyiv's international supporters to win the argument for continued support. Moreover, it becomes less attractive to even make the argument.

This is likely to feed further into the sense of defeatism that has surrounded public debates on Ukraine since Ukraine's performance on the battlefield in 2023 failed to live up to either Kyiv's aspirations or the west's expectations.

Zelenskyy's vulnerabilities

Beyond the precariousness of continued western support, Zelenskyy has also become more vulnerably domestically. Repeated high-profile corruption scandals undermine one of his key election promises back in 2019 that he would root out graft.

While the Ukrainian President has strengthened anti-corruption agencies and been open about the problems Ukraine continues to face, his continued crackdown can now also be framed as politically motivated by his domestic detractors. This will only serve to deepen and entrench political divides in Ukraine. And that's the last thing Zelenskyy needs at a time when there is already a highly divisive debate over war strategy and when disagreements between the country's political and military leaderships have become increasingly public.

On that front, it remains unclear whether Zelenskyy will replace his commander-in-chief, General Valeriy Zaluzhny, as has been widely reported, or does not have the power to do so. The Ukrainian president is said to have offered Zaluzhny a new role as a defence adviser, which the military chief is understood to have refused. Relations between the two have soured in recent months, partly as a result of the failure of Ukraine's 2023 counteroffensive to score any significant battlefield successes.

The President castigated his top general in November 2023 for publicly saying that the war was in a "stalemate". There has also been speculation that Zaluzhny might enter politics and stand against Zelenskyy for the presidency. A poll in December found that while 62% of Ukrainians said they trusted Zelenskyy, 88% said they trusted Zaluzhny.

Without real headway being made in the fight against corruption, the broadly pro-western and pro-European constituency from which Zelenskyy draws most of his support is also likely to weaken. A European future will look less attractive to people who see western support as simply propping up a corrupt elite.

—The Conversation

SALAR ساڈ

How can parents keep children safe from VR?

Virtual reality (VR) headsets are increasingly popular among adults and children. They are part of extended reality environments, which "enable ever more realistic and immersive experiences".

VR provides entry into computer-generated 3D worlds and games with different environments and interactions. Sometimes this is loosely referred to as the "metaverse".

The majority of VR headsets have a lower age limit of 10–13 years due to safety concerns of extended reality technologies in general and VR headsets in particular.

But VR is increasingly used by young children, even of preschool age. These immersive technologies make it difficult to monitor children's physical and emotional experiences and with whom they interact. So what are the dangers, and what can we do to keep the kids safe?

The good and the bad

VR allows children to dive into a digital world where they can immerse themselves into different characters (avatars). Thanks to the richness of the stimuli, VR can give the illusion of actually being in the virtual location – this is called "virtual presence".

If children then interact with other people in the virtual world, the psychological realism is enhanced. These experiences can be fun and rewarding. As children identify with their avatars, the boundary between them and the VR device is blurred when playing in the metaverse.

Children can even develop traumatic memories when playing in virtual worlds. Due to the immersive nature of VR, the sense of presence makes it feel as if the child's avatar is actually "real".

Research is still emerging, but it is known children can form memories from virtual experiences, which means sexual abuse that occurs virtually could turn into a real-world traumatic memory.

The rise of 'cyber grooming'

Research has found that online predators use different grooming strategies to manipulate children into sexual interactions. This sometimes leads to offline encounters without the knowledge of parents.

Non-threatening grooming strategies that build relationships are common. Perpetrators may use friendship strategies to develop a relationship with children and to build trust. The child then views the person as a trusted friend rather than a stranger. As a result, the prevention messages about strangers learned through education programmes are ineffective in protecting children.

A recent meta-analysis found that online sex offenders are usually acquaintances. Unsurprisingly, a proportion of adult predators pretend to be peers (that is, other children or teens).

Sexual approaches by adults occur more commonly on platforms that are widely used by children. "Sexual communication with a child" offences, according to police statistics from the United Kingdom, increased by 84% between 2017–18 and 2021–22.

Due to the hidden nature of cyber grooming, it is difficult to know the true prevalence of this issue. Some police reports in Europe indicate that approximately 20% of children have experienced online sexual solicitation, and up to 25% of children reported sexual interaction with an adult online.

Concerning reports by Europol indicate that children have been drawn into erotic role play online. In interviews with researchers, some parents have also shared anecdotal experiences of their children being exposed to explicit sex acts on social online gaming platforms such as Roblox.

Such encounters have the potential to create memories as if the virtual experience had happened in real life.

Parents must try VR themselves

A recent report from the Internet Watch Foundation charity reports that a record number of young children have been manipulated into performing sexual acts online. Through the metaverse, a sexual offender can be virtually brought into a child's bedroom and engage in sexual behaviours through the child's VR device. As VR worlds become more immersive, the danger for children only increases.

Grooming occurs where parents least expect it to happen. To mitigate this danger, parents need to be aware of online grooming patterns – such as isolating the child, developing their trust and asking them to hide a relationship.

To help them understand what their children experience in extended reality environments, parents must familiarise themselves with VR and the metaverse.

If parents experience and experiment with the VR technology themselves, they can have conversations with their children about their experiences and understand with whom the child might interact with.

This will allow parents to make informed decisions and put tailored safeguarding measures in place. These safeguards include reviewing the parental controls and safety features on each platform, and actively learning what their children are playing and whom they are interacting with.

—The Conversation

Some police reports in Europe indicate that approximately 20% of children have experienced online sexual solicitation
PHOTO: PIXABAY

LETTERS

Write to us at salar@salar.news

Israel is flooding Gaza's tunnel network: Scientists assess the risks

The tunnels are a "spider web" of damp passageways dug in sandy soil, former hostage Yocheved Lifshitz told the media after she was released last October
PHOTO: AP

Israel's military has begun injecting "high-flow" seawater into Hamas-built tunnels beneath the Gaza Strip as part of its attempt to "neutralise terrorist infrastructures".

On 30 January, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) confirmed that the plan to flood tunnels under the Gaza Strip, a strategy that has been the subject of rumours since December, is being implemented at a number of undisclosed locations. The IDF's statement added that the move was a "significant engineering and technological breakthrough" and that locations were chosen so that "groundwater in the area would not be compromised".

However, some water researchers are warning that flooding tunnels with seawater could have a devastating effect on Gaza's already scarce freshwater supplies and might destabilise buildings. There are also concerns that flooding the tunnels could endanger many of the approximately 130 remaining Israeli hostages who were abducted by Hamas in its attacks of 7 October 2023. The hostages' locations remain unknown. But one researcher Nature spoke to says he suspects the impact of the flooding will be limited, because Gaza's aquifer is already contaminated by seawater.

The tunnels are a "spider web" of damp passageways dug in sandy soil, former hostage Yocheved Lifshitz told the media after she was released last October.

One tunnel is 50 metres deep, according to Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and some have several entrance shafts and are reinforced with concrete and equipped with power cables and piping. The tunnels are probably used to store weapons, as well as for holding hostages captive. They extend to almost every corner of the crowded and devastated 363-square-kilometre Gaza Strip.

Biggest concern

One of the biggest concerns is that seawater used to flood the tunnels will contaminate an important coastal aquifer, which lies between Gaza, Egypt and Israel and supplies nearly 80% of Gaza's water.

Mark Zeitoun, a water engineer and director-general of the Geneva Water Hub in Switzerland, says that Gaza's main source of drinking water is being contaminated. "If you put salty water into a freshwater source, it's polluting, it's contaminating, it's poisoning," he says.

There's a possibility that the seawater, once pumped into the tunnels, will simply leak out, Zeitoun adds. "If you just try filling the tunnels with water, I assume that they're not sealed well enough to hold any water. The water would drain out and into the aquifer," he says.

Geographer Ahmed Ra'fat Ghodieh, based at An-Najah National University in Nablus in the West Bank, agrees that the aquifer is likely to become irreparably contaminated with salt water.

"If they flood these tunnels, then the seawater will penetrate the geological strata, towards the aquifer," says Ghodieh. "Such action will have severe consequences on all aspects of life in Gaza — on agriculture, on soil, on infrastructure." Ghodieh adds that the seawater could create sinkholes that destabilise the foundations of buildings.

But hydrologist Noam Weisbrod, who is dean of the Jacob Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research at Israel's Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, says that those concerned that the entire coastal aquifer will be irreparably contaminated are probably overestimating the flooding's effects. "I'm not sure that the environmental risk is as extreme as people want to believe," he says. The impact of flooding would differ depending on where the affected tunnels are located, he adds.

The water level of Gaza's coastal aquifer ranges from about 60 metres below the surface in the east to just a few metres deep near the coastline, according to a 2020 study published in the journal Water1. More water is being drawn out of the aquifer than can be replaced naturally by fresh water, and as a result the aquifer is already being infiltrated by seawater.

Weisbrod's reasoning takes into account the fact that, in areas close to the coast, the water in the aquifer is already saline. Moreover, he says, "large sections of the aquifer water are already contaminated from unregulated sewage systems, fertilisers and more".

Weisbrod also says that Israel's plan could have limited impact. The tunnel network "is not one big metro plan like in New York or in London", he explains.

Gaza's water crisis

The debate over the tunnels highlights a problem that existed before the flooding started: clean water is scarce in Gaza, irrespective of the extent to which the aquifer is contaminated by seawater pumping. In 2020, United Nations agencies estimated that 10% of the population had access to safe drinking water.

Some water is piped in by Israel and Egypt. A £10-million (US$10.9-million) seawater desalination plant funded by the European Union opened in Gaza in 2017, but it presumably cannot function without an electricity supply. Before the war, around half of Gaza's electricity came from Israel, but, in October, the Israeli government cut off supplies.

Almost 1.9 million people have been displaced by the war, with many living in tents or on the streets in the southern Gazan city of Rafah.

Following torrential rains in January, many are collecting drinking water in dishes and buckets, Ghodieh says. Others buy water from tanker trucks — low-quality water from the aquifer that has been desalinated by private companies — says David Lehrer, director of the Centre for Applied Environmental Diplomacy at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies in the Arava Valley, Israel.

—Courtesy, Nature

PHOTO: X

Dua Lipa, Billie Eilish and SZA to star at Grammys

NEW YORK, 4 FEB

Whisper it quietly... but could the Grammy Awards get it right this year? The ceremony, which takes place in Los Angeles on Sunday, is notorious for scoring own goals, often rewarding middle-of-the-road heritage acts over cutting-edge, contemporary pop. But this year's nominees are straight-down-the-line populist picks, with R&B star SZA leading the field on nine. There will also be performances from big names ranging from Dua Lipa and Billie Eilish to Joni Mitchell and U2. Comedian Trevor Noah will host for the fourth year running, overseeing a staggering 94 categories, from best contemporary Christian album to best audiobook, where Michelle Obama will square off against Meryl Streep. Elsewhere, Phoebe Bridgers' indie-rock supergroup Boygenius, and pop star Victoria Monét have seven nominations each. Chart stars Taylor Swift, Olivia Rodrigo, Miley Cyrus, Lana Del Rey and Ice Spice also have multiple nominations in a female-led field. The Grammys are awards presented by the Recording Academy of the United States for outstanding achievement in music. More than 80 will be handed out in what's called the "premiere ceremony" at 20:30 GMT on Sunday (12:30 in Los Angeles). In India it will start from 6.30 am in the morning till 10 am.

—BBC News

Denver shooting injures at least 6 people: police

DENVER, 4 FEB

At least six people were injured in an early morning shooting in Denver Sunday, police said. Investigators were at the scene of a shooting in the 5000 block of North Orleans Court, where six victims were located, the Denver Police Department said in a social media post. The identities of the victims and the extent of their injuries were not immediately known. Officers were working on gathering information about a possible suspect, police said. *—AP*

PHOTO: X

Aston Barrett, Bob Marley's bassist, dies at 77

LONDON, 4 FEB

Aston Barrett, the bassist of the legendary reggae band Bob Marley and the Wailers, has died at the age of 77. "Family Man", as he was known, was born in 1946 and grew up in the Jamaican capital, Kingston. Announcing the death, his family said Barrett had been through a "long medical battle" but gave no details. He was a key figure in the growth of reggae. He played on nearly all the Wailers albums as well as for Burning Spear, Peter Tosh and many other acts. In a social media post on Saturday, Barrett's son Aston Barrett Jr said: "With the heaviest of hearts, we share the news of the passing of our beloved Aston 'Familyman' Barrett after a long medical battle."

—BBC News

US & UK allies strike Houthi areas of Yemen

They hit over 36 Houthi targets across 13 locations

WASHINGTON, 4 FEB

Pentagon said the UK, Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands and New Zealand were involved in strikes ***PHOTO: PTI***

The US and the UK have conducted joint strikes on 36 Houthi targets across 13 locations in Yemen, in another wave of assaults intended to degrade the capabilities of the Iran-backed militia that has targeted international shipping vessels in the Red Sea in response to the Israel-Hamas war.

The Pentagon said the UK, Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands and New Zealand were involved in Saturday's strikes against Houthi targets. The latest strikes, executed with fighter jets and ships, come after the US launched strikes on 85 targets in Syria and Iraq on Friday in response to a deadly drone attack on a US military base in Jordan last Sunday that killed three of its service members.

"Militaries from the United States and the United Kingdom conducted additional strikes against the Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen," Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a statement. This collective action sends a clear message to the Houthis that they will continue to bear further consequences if they do not end their illegal attacks on international shipping and naval vessels, Austin said.

"We will not hesitate to defend lives and the free flow of commerce in one of the world's most critical waterways," Austin said. These strikes, he said, are intended to disrupt further and degrade the capabilities of the Iranian-backed Houthi militia to conduct their reckless and destabilising attacks against US and international vessels lawfully transiting the Red Sea.

- The latest strikes, executed with fighter jets and ships, come after the US launched strikes on 85 targets in Syria and Iraq

Austin said that the coalition forces targeted 13 locations associated with the Houthis' deeply buried weapons storage facilities, missile systems and launchers, air defence systems, and radars, Austin said. A joint statement issued by the US, the UK and its other coalition partners said that the militaries of the United States and United Kingdom, with support from other mentioned vcountries conducted an additional round of proportionate and necessary strikes against 36 Houthi targets across 13 locations in Yemen.

This was in response to the Houthis' continued attacks against international and commercial shipping as well as naval vessels transiting the Red Sea. These precision strikes are intended to disrupt and degrade the capabilities that the Houthis use to threaten global trade and the lives of innocent mariners. *—PTI*

Israel issues its detailed warning yet to Hezbollah

RAFAH, 4 FEB

Israel's military has issued its most detailed warning yet to Hezbollah in neighbouring Lebanon that it would be "ready to attack immediately" if provoked, as it recounted its actions along the northern border during four months of war in Gaza and made a rare acknowledgement of dozens of airstrikes inside Syria against the militant group. "We do not choose war as our first priority, but we are certainly prepared," military spokesperson Daniel Hagari said, adding: "We will continue to act wherever Hezbollah is present, we will continue to act wherever it is required in the Middle East. What is true for Lebanon is true for Syria, and is true for other more distant places." The comments followed the defence minister's warning that a cease-fire in Gaza against Hamas wouldn't mean Israel wouldn't attack Hezbollah as needed.

Efforts to close wide gaps between Israel and Hamas in pursuit of a cease-fire continued in the region where concerns about a wider war with Iran-allied groups remain. *—AP*

5 YEAR BAN

Shah Mahmood Qureshi ***PHOTO: PTI***

Pak EC bars Qureshi from contesting polls

ISLAMABAD, 4 FEB

Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has disqualified Shah Mahmood Qureshi from contesting elections for five years. The announcement comes days after a special court, established under the Official Secrets Act, awarded Qureshi 10 years imprisonment in the high-profile cypher case along with Khan. The disqualification of Qureshi, 67, comes five days before the 8 February general elections, which Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party is contesting despite a state crackdown and without its famous election symbol, the bat.

Citing the special court's judgement dated 30 January, 2024, the ECP said that any convicted individual, in accordance with the Constitution and the law, cannot participate in elections.

"As a consequence, Makhdoom Shah Mehmood Qureshi has become disqualified under Article 63(1)(h) of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan read with Section 232 of the Elections Act, 2017."

The cipher case pertains to a piece of paper, purported to be a diplomatic cable -- the cipher -- that Khan had waved at a public rally on 27 March, 2022, and naming the US, had claimed that it was 'evidence' of an "international conspiracy" to topple his government.

The case was filed against Khan, 71, and Qureshi on 15 August ,2023 by the Federal Investigation Agency, which accused both of violating the secrecy laws while handling the cable sent by the Pakistan embassy in Washington in March 2022. *—PTI)*

28 KILLED AS SHELLING HITS BAKERY IN RUSSIA

KYIV, 4 FEB

Russia says at least 28 people have been killed after Ukrainian forces shelled a bakery in the city of Lysychansk in the occupied eastern region of Luhansk, with the Ministry of Civil Defence, Emergencies and Disaster Relief saying at least one child was among the deceased.

Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova said on Sunday that "dozens of civilians" were inside the building when Ukraine hit it using the US-supplied High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS).

The Emergencies Ministry had released a video late on Saturday of first responders finding dead bodies and taking away bloodied people on stretchers out of the ruins of the one-storey building that appeared to be destroyed.

The building appeared to have housed a restaurant named Adriatic, which local authorities said was known to offer fresh bread during the weekends, attracting many Russians. Foreign Ministry's Zakharova also said Moscow expects "quick and unconditional condemnation" from international organisations. Ukraine has not officially commented on the incident.

Almost two years into the war, the front in eastern Ukraine where Luhansk is located has barely moved in months, but battles continue to rage, with both sides launching deadly attacks during the winter.

—Al Jazeera

Biden wins 1st Democratic primary

WASHINGTON, 4 FEB

Joe Biden ***PHOTO: PTI***

Incumbent US President Joe Biden has secured a decisive win in the Democratic presidential primary in the crucial state of South Carolina, notching his first official victory in his largely unobstructed path to become his party's nominee for a possible rematch against Donald Trump in the November 5 election.

It was the first official primary of the ruling party. South Carolina is the state that launched Biden to the Democratic nomination four years ago. Biden, 81, who is seeking re-election in the November presidential elections, received 96.2 per cent of the votes in Saturday's primary, with almost non-existent Marianne Williamson getting just 2.1 per cent of the votes.

Biden's decisive win, which was called almost immediately after polls closed, was not a surprise given his lack of a formidable challenger. Biden, 81, faces concerns within his party about his age and ability to fire up young voters. Yet despite his flaws as a candidate, a viable Democratic challenger never emerged last year.

- Biden, 81, who is seeking re-election in presidential elections, received 96.2 per cent of the votes in primary

The Republican primary in the state is scheduled to be held on February 24. Former President Trump, 77, is the favourite in that race. "As I said four years ago, this campaign is for everyone who has been knocked down, counted out and left behind. With more than 14 million new jobs and a record 24 straight months — two years — of the unemployment rate under 4%, including a record low unemployment rate for Black Americans, we are leaving no one behind," Biden said in a statement.

He said he would make Republican rival Trump a "loser" in November's election. "In 2020, it was the voters of South Carolina who proved the pundits wrong, breathed new life into our campaign, and set us on the path to winning the Presidency. *—PTI*

KING AND QUEEN WALK

Britain's King Charles III and Queen Camilla arrive to attend a Sunday church service at St Mary Magdalene Church, in Sandringham, Norfolk, England, on Sunday. Charles III has visited church in his first public outing since receiving treatment for an enlarged prostrate ***PHOTO: PTI***

Chile forest fires kill at least 46

VINA DEL MAR, 4 FEB

Intense forest fires burning around a densely populated area of central Chile have caused at least 46 deaths. Over 1,100 homes had been destroyed, said officials.

President Gabriel Boric warned the death toll could worsen as four large fires burn in the region of Valparaiso, where firefighters have struggled to reach the most threatened neighbourhoods.

Boric urged Chileans to cooperate with rescue workers. "If you are told to evacuate don't hesitate to do it,". The fires are advancing fast and climatic conditions have made them difficult to control. There are high temperatures, strong winds and low humidity."

92 forest fires were burning in the centre and south of the country, where temperatures have been unusually high this week, said Interior Minister Carolina Tohá, on Saturday.

Two fires near the towns of Quilpué and Villa Alemana had burned through at least 8,000 hectares (19,770acres) since Friday. One of the fires was threatening the coastal resort town of Viña del Mar, where some neighbourhoods had already been hit hard.

In Villa Independencia, a hillside neighbourhood on the eastern edge of the town, several blocks of homes and businesses were destroyed. Burned cars with broken windows lined the streets were covered in ash.

"I've been here 32 years, and never imagined this would happen," said Rolando Fernández, one of the residents who lost his home.

450 firefighters were brought into the area to help battle the blazes, Tohá said.

The fires were burning on mountains that are hard to reach, such as neighbourhoods built precariously on the edge of Viña del Mar. *—PTI*

SL achieved economic recovery: President

COLOMBO, 4 FEB

Wickremesinghe ***PHOTO: PTI***

Sri Lanka has achieved progress in its economic recovery process, said President Ranil Wickremesinghe on Sunday. It is due to the steadfast support of citizens to a comprehensive long-term national rebuilding programme despite facing hardships.

Addressing the 75th anniversary of independence celebrations held, he said when the country marked Independence Day last year it was labelled bankrupt.

"If we go on this road, the difficulties will fade away. The cost of living will become lighter. The economy will become stronger," Wickremesinghe stressed.

Sri Lanka in April 2022 declared its first ever sovereign default since gaining independence from Britain in 1948.

The crisis led Wickremesinghe's predecessor Gotabaya Rajapaksa out of office through a campaign of public agitation. Wickremesinghe stepped in to fill in Rajapaksa's remaining term.

Since then, Wickremesinghe has put in place unpopular economic reforms to supplement a bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Wickremesinghe has steered the country out of a period of shortages of essentials and long hours of power cuts.

The government continues to struggle to restructure its external debt while public dissatisfaction with raised utility rates and taxes has made Wickremesinghe unpopular.

Nevertheless, he expects to contest the next presidential election due in the last quarter of the year. *—PTI*

UK forces not ready for high-intensity war: MPs

LONDON, 4 FEB

The UK's armed forces will not be ready for a "high-intensity" war unless shortages in personnel and equipment are rapidly addressed, MPs have warned. The Commons Defence Committee said personnel were leaving faster than they could be recruited, and the "offer" to them had to be improved. A "vicious cycle" needed to be broken to allow the UK to face "increasingly challenging" threats, it added. Increasing recruitment and improving retention was a priority, the MoD said.

Last month, General Sir Patrick Sanders, the head of the Army and outgoing Chief of the General Staff. called for the country to train a volunteer "citizen army" ready to fight a land war, warning that an increase in reservist numbers alone "would not be enough". He highlighted the threat from Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, and pointed to steps being taken by other European nations to put their populations on a "war footing". He also called for more to be done to equip and modernise the armed services.

- CDC said personnel were leaving faster than they could be recruited, and the "offer" to them had to be improved

Sir Patrick has previously argued for the need for a larger Army, whose professional ranks now number around 73,000, compared with around 100,000 in 2010.

The cross-party defence committee's report, "Ready for war?", found that, while it was a "matter of national pride" that whenever the armed forces were asked to act, they found a way, "overstretch has negatively impacted high-intensity warfighting readiness due to the sheer pace of operations and other commitments".

The MPs said they were "increasingly concerned" about a "crisis" in the recruitment and retention of both regular personnel and reservists, with operational demands making recovery and training harder to achieve. *—BBC News*

AFTER CANCER DIAGNOSIS

Namibian President Hage Geingob dies at 82

CAIRO, 4 FEB

Namibian President Hage Geingob passes away while receiving medical treatment, announced his office on Sunday.

In a post on the social media platform X, formerly Twitter, the Namibian presidency said Geingob's medical team at Lady Pohamba Hospital did its best to help him, but Geingob died with his wife, Monica Geingos, and children by his side.

Geingob was undergoing treatment for cancer.

The 82-year-old had a colonoscopy and a gastroscopy on 8 January, followed by a biopsy. Angolo Mbumba, Namibia's acting president, called for calm, saying in the same post that the "Cabinet will convene with immediate effect in order to make the necessary state arrangements in this regard."

Geingob, who was president of the southern African nation since 2015, was set to finish his second and final term in office this year.

Namibian President Hage Geingob ***PHOTO: PTI***

He was the country's third president since it gained independence in 1990, following more than a century of German and then apartheid South African rule.

- The 82-year-old had a colonoscopy and a gastroscopy on 8 January, followed by a biopsy

After spending nearly three decades in exile in neighboring Botswana and the US as an anti-apartheid activist, Geingob returned to Namibia as its first prime minister from 1990 to 2002.

Soft-spoken but firm on advancing Africa's agenda as an important stakeholder in world affairs, Geingob maintained close relations with the US and other Western countries. He also served in the same capacity from 2008 to 2012. In 2014, he said he had survived prostate cancer. Namibia is set to hold elections to choose a new leader in November. *—PTI*

14 Myanmar border guards seek shelter in Bangladesh

DHAKA, 4 FEB

At least 14 members of Myanmar's paramilitary Border Guard Police (BGP) have sought refuge in Bangladesh after escaping the junta-run country amid reports of heavy gunfights between the government troops and the rebel resistance fighters, officials said here on Sunday.

The soldiers entered through the Tambru border in predawn hours and sought shelter from the Bangladesh Border Guard (BGB). "The 14 members of their BGP fled their country. They are now in our custody," an official of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) told reporters on Sunday at the southeastern Cox's Bazar, bordering Burma.

Asked about the matter, Minister of Home Affairs Asaduzzaman Khan said, "There are about 14 of them. They are called BGP or Border Guard Police." "As you know, they have been fighting with the Arakan Army. At one point, they came here and took shelter. We are speaking to the Myanmar government about the matter," bdnews24.com quoted Khan as saying. Residents in several frontier Bangladesh villages moved to safety amid skirmishes between the Myanmar government troops and the rebel Arakan Army.

Several mortar shells and bullets landed inside Bangladesh in the past several days though no casualty was reported. *—PTI*

SBI says wage hike provisions to reach ₹26K cr by March

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

State Bank of India, which saw a sharp 35 per cent fall in its December quarter net profit due to a one-time expenditure towards increased salaries and pensions, said the burden will jump to around Rs 26,000 crore by March this year.The country's largest lender on Saturday reported a steep decline of 35 per cent in its net income at Rs 9,164 crore during October-December 2023 compared to Rs 14,205 crore profit recorded in the corresponding period a year ago and Rs 14,330 crore earned in the preceding quarter.

The public sector lender attributed the fall in profit to the additional provision of Rs 7,100 crore made in the reporting quarter towards salaries and pensions arising out of the 17 per cent wage hike settlement reached with employee unions in November last year. The revises wages are effective from November 2022.Explaining the impact of the wage hike settlement, chairman Dinesh Kumar Khara said, "Of the Rs 7,100 crore total provisions made in the December quarter, Rs 5,400 crore is towards pensions, because there was some anomalies in the way our pensions were calculated. Since 2022, some of our employees were getting 40 per cent and some were getting 50 per cent of their last drawn salary as pension and the matter has been sub-judice since then "Now there is legal clarity, we thought of clearing this at a go with this Rs 5,400 crore allocation. Following the recent court order, we have decided to pay every one of our 1.8 lakh pensioners at 50 per cent. This allocation takes care of the entire backlog till December 2023," he told reporters. That means, the wage hike impact will shave as much as Rs 25,990 crore off the bank's profit by the end of March, as the bank has already provisioned Rs 13,400 crore till September 2023 and an additional Rs 7,100 crore in the December quarter. Also, it will have to set aside Rs 5,490 crore more in the March quarter, totalling to Rs 25,990 crore. And most of the outgo is towards pensions.—*PTI*

Mcap of eight of top-10 most valued firms climb ₹2.90Lcr

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

The combined market valuation of eight of the top-10 most valued firms climbed Rs 2.90 lakh crore last week, with Reliance Industries emerging as the lead gainer, amid optimism in equities. Last week, BSE benchmark Sensex jumped 1,384.96 points or 1.95 per cent.From the top-10 pack, Reliance Industries, Tata Consultancy Services, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, Infosys, LIC, State Bank of India, and Hindustan Unilever were the gainers, while Bharti Airtel and ITC faced erosion of their valuation. The combined market valuation of eight of the top 10 most valued firms stood at Rs 2,90,267.98 crore.The market capitalisation (mcap) of Reliance Industries jumped Rs 1,38,290.85 crore to reach Rs 19,72,028.45 crore. Shares of the company jumped 7.54 per cent last week. Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) added Rs 57,867.9 crore, taking its valuation to Rs 14,51,307.84 crore. The market valuation of the State Bank of India climbed Rs 33,467.29 crore to Rs 5,80,456.76 crore and that of Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) zoomed Rs 26,153.87 crore to Rs 5,97,490.91 crore.The mcap of ICICI Bank advanced by Rs 10,522.67 crore to Rs 7,19,033.83 crore and that of Infosys surged Rs 9,566.79 crore to Rs 7,03,024.44 crore. The valuation of HDFC Bank went up by Rs 8,771.34 crore to Rs 10,98,772.65 crore and that of Hindustan Unilever rallied by Rs 5,627.27 crore to Rs 5,76,601.44 crore. However, the mcap of ITC fell by Rs 18,931.64 crore to Rs 5,49,330.64 crore and that of Bharti Airtel declined by Rs 5,231.18 crore to Rs 6,47,176.65 crore. In the ranking of most valued firms, Reliance Industries retained the number one title, followed by TCS, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, Infosys, Bharti Airtel, LIC, State Bank of India, Hindustan Unilever and ITC. —*PTI*

PAYTM PAYMENTS BANK MELTDOWN, WHAT IT MEANS

The current crisis where RBI ordered Paytm Bank to halt most of its business

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

Paytm Wallet users carried out 24.72 crore transactions worth over Rs 8,000 crore for purchase of goods ***PHOTO: PTI***

Son of a schoolteacher from Aligarh district in Uttar Pradesh, Vijay Shekhar Sharma was enamoured by Jack Ma-run Alibaba's focus on smartphones rather than desktop computers, when he built a digital payments company that would let Indians pay for vegetables, pay utility bills or buy cinema tickets using their mobile phones.

Sharma, the poster boy of India's fintech boom, also set out to build an Alipay-like mobile marketplace to go alongside the payments business, allowing businesses to sell goods from matchbox to iPhones online.

With fame came a set of controversies for arguably the most high-profile of a wave of Indian tech entrepreneurs. But none like the one now. The current crisis where the Reserve Bank has ordered Paytm Payments Bank to halt most of its business, is an existential one. Here is a breakdown of Paytm Payments Bank crisis:

What was the recent RBI action against Paytm bank all about?

The regulator last week ordered Paytm Payments Bank Ltd, a restricted bank that can take deposits but cannot lend, to not take any further deposits or conduct credit transactions or carry out top-ups on any customers accounts, prepaid instruments, wallets, cards for paying road tolls after 29February.

Paytm wallet customers can use money till the time their balance is exhausted. They cannot add money after 29February. And in case RBI does not relent, top-up for Paytm wallet will stop and transactions through it would no longer can be carried.

So what is Paytm Payments Bank, and who owns it?

Paytm Payments Bank Limited (PPBL) is an associate of One97 Communications Limited (OCL). One97 Communications holds 49 per cent of the paid-up share capital (directly and through its subsidiary) of PPBL. Vijay Shekhar Sharma has a 51 per cent stake in the bank.

PPBL commenced operations as a payments bank with effect from 23May, 2017. Paytm Payments Bank offered digital banking, including savings accounts, current accounts, fixed deposits with partner banks, and balance in wallets, UPI, and FASTag, among other services.

Paytm Wallet, which comes under PPBL, leads the segment. As per RBI's provisional data for December 2023, Paytm Wallet users carried out 24.72 crore transactions worth over Rs 8,000 crore for purchase of goods and services while 2.07 crore transactions were carried out for transferring over Rs 5,900 crore.

What happened and what it means for customers?

The RBI on January 31 directed the Paytm Payments Bank to stop accepting deposits or top-ups in customer accounts, wallets, FASTags and other instruments after February 29. Withdrawal or utilisation of balances by its customers from their accounts, including savings bank accounts, current accounts, prepaid instruments, FASTags, National Common Mobility Cards, are to be permitted without any restrictions, up to their available balance.

Paytm Wallet users can continue to carry on transactions till 29 February. However, after 29February, they will be able to use their existing balance till the time it is exhausted but not add any money to their account.

The same rule is applicable on PPBL accounts, Paytm wallet linked services like FASTag, National Common Mobility Card that are used for travel in metro and other public transport.

What are the alternatives for users?

There are over 20 banks and non-banking entities that offer wallet service. The leading one after PPBL wallet includes Mobikwik, PhonePe, SBI, ICICI Bank, HDFC, Amazon Pay etc.

Similarly, there are 37 banks comprising all the known public and private sector banks like SBI, HDFC, ICICI, IDFC, Airtel Payments Bank which are authorised to provide FASTag. Customers can recharge FASTag online using their banks mobile banking, internet banking or third party apps like Google Pay, PhonePe etc.

The banking regulator had been frequently flagging off issues. —*PTI*

'RBI likely to resume status-quo on short-term lending rate'

MUMBAI, 4 FEB

PHOTO: PTI

Coming close on the heels of the interim budget which maintained the status quo on policy front, the Reserve Bank is likely to continue with the pause on the short-term lending rate in its upcoming bi-monthly monetary policy this week as retail inflation is still near the higher end of its comfort zone, say experts.

It is almost a year since the Reserve Bank has kept the short-term lending rate or repo rate stable at 6.5 per cent. The benchmark interest rate was last raised in February 2023 to 6.5 per cent from 6.25 per cent to contain inflation driven mainly by global developments.

The retail inflation in the current financial year has declined after touching a peak of 7.44 per cent in July, 2023, it is still high and was 5.69 per cent in December 2023, though within the Reserve Bank's comfort zone of 4-6 per cent.

RBI Governor-headed Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) will start its three-day deliberations on February 6. Governor Shaktikanta Das will announce the decision of the six-member panel on February 8.

Madan Sabnavis, Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda, said the MPC is likely to maintain an unchanged approach in terms of both rate and stance. "This is so as inflation, as per the December data, is still high and there are pressures on the food side. This is notwithstanding the fact that core inflation has come down," he said. Going by RBI's forecasts on inflation it would remain above 5 per cent till June end and come down subsequently.

"Also with growth being robust, there is less pressure to think of a rate cut at this time. In fact, the RBI has indicated that the transmission of the 250 bps cut in rates is still not complete and hence there is reason for a pause," Sabnavis said. —*PTI*

RBI interest rate to dictate stock markets

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

Stock markets will be driven by quarterly earnings by index majors, global trends and the RBI's interest rate decision this week after digesting news on budget proposals and US Federal policy outcome, say analysts.

The trading activity of foreign investors and the movement of global oil benchmark Brent crude would also dictate trends in equities. "On the domestic front, the MPC (Monetary Policy Committee) meeting is scheduled from February 6-8.

The Q3 quarterly results season will continue to remain in focus. Bharti Airtel, Power Grid, Nestle, Lupin and Tata Power will announce their results this week," said Pravesh Gour, Senior Technical Analyst, Swastika Investmart Ltd.

Market participants will be keeping an eye on the movement of the rupee against the dollar and crude oil prices, Gour said.

Investments by Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) and Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs) will also be monitored, he added.

"With the US Fed and interim Budget now behind, all eyes will be on RBI's policy meeting this week," Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Retail Research, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said. Last week, the BSE benchmark jumped 1,384.96 points or 1.95 per cent, and the Nifty climbed 501.2 points or 2.34 per cent. On Friday, the Nifty reached its lifetime peak of 22,126.80. —*PTI*

FMCG firms report single-digit growth

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

Fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies have reported single-digit volume growth with improved margins in most segments during December quarter, helped by moderating commodity inflation, though operating environment remained challenging.

Some of the companies also reported a decline in their topline numbers, as they extended the benefits of softening commodity prices to the consumer by lowering the prices, which had a bearing on their gross sales numbers.

Companies such as HUL, ITC, Marico, Dabur, and Godrej Consumer Products said urban markets continued their moderate growth, while consumer demand from rural India remained subdued even as they expect an improvement in coming quarters.

Moreover, the late arrival of winter also impacted the pickup of relevant products such as lotions, oils and creams.

Hindustan Unilever (HUL) reported a muted growth in consolidated net profit at Rs 2,508 crore and its sales were marginally down to Rs 15,259 crore. "Overall, FMCG demand trends have largely remained stable and similar to what we saw last quarter. While market volumes grew at high single digits year-on-year (y-o-y), this came on a base period where volumes declined in mid-single digit," said HUL CEO & MD Rohit Jawa in his latest earnings call. —*PTI*

BoM records highest growth in deposit mobilisation

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

Out of 12 public sector banks, only BoM and State Bank of India (SBI) could log a double-digit growth in deposits in the third quarter ended December 2023.

The Pune-based lender BoM reported a 17.89 per cent growth in deposits followed by SBI at 12.84 per cent during the quarter, according to published quarterly numbers of the public sector banks (PSBs).

However, SBI's total deposits were about 18.5 times higher at Rs 45,67,927 crore, as compared to Rs 2,45,734 crore of BoM in absolute terms. Central Bank of India was the third by clocking a 9.53 per cent growth in deposits while Punjab National Bank recorded a 9.10 per cent increase. —*PTI*

At 100, ULCCS set to expand footprint

T'PURAM, 4 FEB

PHOTO: IANS

Having grown from humble beginnings into a major infrastructure builder, Kerala-based Uralungal Labour Contract Cooperative Society (ULCCS) has plans to extend its footprint in its centenary year, based on the foundational vision of sustainable and inclusive development.

Founded by a group of youngsters inspired by the teachings of social reformer and renaissance flag-bearer Vagbhatanandan as a workers' collective at a village near Uralungal in Kozhikode district in 1925, ULCCL is now a mega enterprise with an annual turnover of Rs 3000 crore and a large workforce on muster rolls.

As a Total Solution Provider (TSP), ULCCS in recent years forayed into cutting-edge fields as well including Information Technology, skill development and material quality testing, even as consolidating its position in the infrastructure development.

With a rich legacy and flourishing portfolio of 7500+ projects, ULCCS is a member of the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) and earned the international acclaim as promoter of a unique development model.

The year-long centenary celebrations will be inaugurated by Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on February 13. —*PTI*

EXPANDING OPERATION

India's drive towards clean energy systems, increasing penetration of electric vehicles ***PHOTO: PTI***

Adani's $1.2B plant to boost metal production

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

Billionaire Gautam Adani-led group is building the world's largest single-location copper manufacturing plant at Mundra in Gujarat, which will help cut India's dependence on imports and aid energy transition, sources said.

The USD 1.2-billion facility will start operations of the first phase by March-end and full-scale 1 million tonnes capacity by FY29 (March 2029), two sources with knowledge of the matter said. India joins China and other nations that are rapidly expanding production of copper, a metal crucial for transition away from fossil fuels. Technologies critical to the energy transition like electric vehicles (EVs), charging infrastructure, solar photovoltaics (PV), wind and batteries, all require copper.

Kutch Copper Ltd (KCL), a subsidiary of the group's flagship Adani Enterprises Ltd (AEL), is setting up a greenfield copper refinery project for the production of refined copper with 1 million tonnes per annum capacity in two phases.

For Phase-1, capacity of 0.5 million tonnes per annum, KCL achieved financial closure through a syndicated club loan in June 2022.

"Adani wants to become a global leader in the copper business, leveraging the Adani Group's strong position in resource trading, logistics, renewable power, and infrastructure," one of the sources said. "Their aim is to be the world's largest copper smelting complex by 2030."

He said India's per capita copper consumption is estimated around 0.6 kg compared to the global average of 3.2 kg.

"India's drive towards clean energy systems, increasing penetration of electric vehicles and a host of associated applications are expected to double the domestic copper demand by 2030." "The Adani Group is investing heavily in energy transition, in which copper will play a vital role. It is expanding into adjacent areas of its current capabilities, which makes the copper business a strategic fit," he said. Copper is the third most used industrial metal after steel and aluminium, and its demand is rising on the back of fast-growing renewable energy, telecom and electric vehicle industries. India's copper production has been unable to meet this demand, and domestic supply disruptions have led to a higher dependency on imported copper. India's imports have been consistently on the rise for the past five years.

India imported a record 1,81,000 tonnes of copper, while exports plummeted to a record low of 30,000 tonnes, even lower than the Covid pandemic period, according to the data from the government. —*PTI*

India seeks market access from S Korea

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

PHOTO: PTI

India has sought greater market access for certain products such as steel, rice, and shrimp from South Korea with a view to boost exports of these goods, an official said.

These are part of the negotiations, which are underway, for the upgradation of the existing free trade agreement between the two countries, which is officially dubbed as comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA).

The agreement was operationalised in January 2010. The 10th round of upgradation talks are underway here. "We are asking for greater market access for products such as steel, rice and shrimp," the official said. In the meeting, India has flagged issues over Korean firms not buying Indian steel. "Korean firms in India also place orders from their local firms in Korea, so this is a double whammy for Indian companies. The Korean side has asked for an increase in price competitiveness here," the official added.

On rice, there is a tariff rate quota of five lakh tonnes in Korea. Under this, they have given a quota of 4.8 lakh tonnes to five countries -- China, Australia, the US, Thailand and Vietnam -- and the rest of the countries have a quota of only 20,000 tonnes. "India is in the others category. So we are demanding either to put India in the country's specific category or increase our quota. South Korea has an import duty of 513 per cent on rice," the official said, adding on shrimp, there is an import duty of 5 per cent.

Korea wants greater access in sectors such as auto components and chemicals.

The ninth round of India-Korea CEPA upgradation negotiation was held in Seoul from November 3-4, 2022. —*PTI*

ENERGY SECTOR TO BOOM

ONGC, IOC, other oil PSUs to invest Rs 1.2 lakh cr in FY25

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

ONGC, IOC and other oil PSUs will invest about Rs 1.2 lakh crore in the coming fiscal starting April in oil and gas exploration, refineries, petrochemicals and laying pipelines to meet the needs of the world's fastest-growing energy consuming nation.

The investment proposed in 2024-25 is 5 per cent higher than Rs 1.12 lakh crore spent by the State-owned oil firms in the current fiscal year that ends on March 31, according to Budget 2024-25 documents.

Oil and Natural Gas Corp (ONGC) has a planned capital spending of Rs 30,800 crore in the next financial year. This expenditure in finding new reserves of oil and gas and bringing to production discoveries it has already made, is slightly higher than Rs 30,500 crore capex in 2023-24 fiscal (April 2023 to March 2024). It is developing discoveries on both east and west coasts of the country.

The top oil producer's overseas arm, ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL) will invest 68 per cent more at Rs 5,580 crore in 2024-25 in oil and gas operations abroad when compared with the previous fiscal.

Indian Oil Corp (IOC), the country's top oil refiner, will be the top spender with an investment outlay of Rs 30,910 crore, with the bulk of it in expansion and upgrade of its seven refineries that produce fuel. This outlay also includes Rs 3,299 crore in the petrochemical business and another Rs 236.48 crore in the small oil and gas exploration portfolio it has.

ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL) will invest 68 per cent more at Rs 5,580 crore in 2024-25 ***PHOTO: PTI***

- The investment proposed in 2024-25 is 5 per cent higher than 1.12 lakh crore spent by the State-owned oil firms in the current fiscal year that ends on March 31, according to Budget 2024-25 documents.

The investment planned by IOC is less than Rs 31,254 crore spending in the current 2023-24 fiscal.

Bharat Petroleum Corp Ltd (BPCL) has proposed a 30 per cent higher capital spending at Rs 13,000 crore, two-thirds of which will be in its core refining business.

Gas utility GAIL India Ltd will see its planned investment decline to over Rs 8,000 crore in 2024-25 from Rs 9,750 crore in the previous fiscal as most of its pipeline grid expansion projects are nearing completion.

Hindustan Petroleum Corp Ltd (HPCL), a subsidiary of ONGC, will invest Rs 12,500 crore in FY25, marginally higher than Rs 12,000 crore in the previous year. Oil India Ltd, the nation's second-largest oil producer, will invest Rs 6,880 crore next year as compared to Rs 5,648 crore in the current fiscal.

In her interim budget for 2024-25 ahead of general elections, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had on February 1 put off capital support to oil marketing companies — IOC, BPCL and HPCL — to the next fiscal year. —*PTI*

PHOTO: AP

Williamson, Ravindra lift NZ against South Africa

MOUNT MAUNGANUI, 4 FEB

Kane Williamson scored his 30th Test century and Rachin Ravindra his first as New Zealand reached 258-2 by stumps on the first day of the first Test against South Africa on Sunday when runs at times flowed like treacle. Williamson was 112 not out at stumps and Ravindra 118 in an unbroken partnership of 219.For much of the day, scoring had been difficult. New Zealand scored 65 runs from 25 overs in the first session and 60 runs from 27 overs in the second as a novice South Africa attack produced a spirited performance and tied down the New Zealand batters. The payoff for that hard graft came in the extended last session when New Zealand scored 133 from 34 overs, bumping up their run rate for the day to three runs an over.—*AP*

PHOTO: PTI

Looking forward to tough battle against India: Brinkman

BHUBANESWAR, 4 FEB

The World's top-ranked side Netherlands is relishing the challenge of facing India and Australia during the FIH Hockey Pro League to prepare for the Paris Olympics, said Dutch skipper Thierry Brinkman on Sunday.The Netherlands men's hockey team arrived here on Sunday to participate in the Pro League scheduled at the Kalinga Hockey Stadium here from February 10 to 16 and Birsa Munda Hockey Stadium in Rourkela from February 19 to 25."The preparations have been going well. We have done a great job in training sessions. We love to be in India and there is a good team spirit among all of us. We are excited for the campaign to begin," Brinkman said in a Hockey India release.Five national teams Ireland, The Netherlands, India, Spain, and Australia will participate in the India leg of the Pro League.—*PTI*

Dani Alves trial for sexual assault to start on Monday

BARCELONA, 4 FEB

After spending a year in a Spanish jail, Brazilian soccer star Dani Alves will go on trial this week for allegedly sexually assaulting a young woman at a Barcelona nightclub.Alves, a former Barcelona player, is accused of sexually assaulting the woman on the night of 30, 2022 Dec. He denies any wrongdoing. The trial is scheduled for Monday through Wednesday at a Barcelona courthouse.State prosecutors are seeking a nine-year prison sentence for Alves if convicted while the lawyers representing his accuser want 12 years. —*AP*

Para Shooting World Cup in jeopardy

NEW DELHI, 4 FEB

The hosting of the Para Shooting World Cup in India next month is in jeopardy following the sports ministry's decision to suspend the Paralympic Committee of India (PCI) for not holding elections on time.The Para Shooting World Cup, to be held at the Karni Singh Ranges here from March 6-15, is the first-ever mega para shooting competition allotted to India and offers 24 Paris Paralympic quota places.More than 500 pistol, rifle, and shotgun shooters from 52 countries are expected to compete in the competition and aim to secure Paralympic quota places in the last tournament of the qualification cycle.—*PTI*

Shubman Gill's ton keeps India in control as England chase 399

Important and satisfying to score runs at number 3: Gill

VISAKHAPATNAM, 2 FEB

Shubman Gill struck form with a century as India left England a record victory target of 399 on day three of the second Test on Sunday. England, who lead the five-match series 1-0, reached 67-1 at stumps after opener Ben Duckett fell for 28 in Visakhapatnam. Left-hander Duckett put on an attacking 50-run stand with fellow opener Zak Crawley, batting on 29 before Ravichandran Ashwin got him out for his 497th Test wicket. Nightwatchman Rehan Ahmed, on nine, joined Crawley with England needing another 332 for victory.

The highest fourth-innings target successfully chased against India is England's 378 at Edgbaston in 2022, and the most successful in India was when the hosts got 387 against England in 2008.

Spinners Tom Hartley and Ahmed combined to bowl out India for 255 after Gill's 104 on a day of bowling and fielding brilliance.

Veteran pace bowler James Anderson struck early to remove the openers, and India slipped further after a stunning catch by captain Ben Stokes before Gill stabilized the innings.

Gill hit his third Test ton, and first in his 12 innings since March 2023, to pull

2nd Test: Shubman Gill celebrates after scoring a century against England PHOTO: PTI

India out from 122-4 with two key stands including 89 runs with Axar Patel.

He reached the hundred with a single off debutant spinner Shoaib Bashir and raised his bat to a cheering Sunday crowd.

He soon attempted a reverse sweep and departed when Bashir got him caught behind, a dismissal that was turned down by the umpire but replays showed the ball grazed the batsman's glove before wicketkeeper Ben Foakes took a sharp catch.

Gill had two lucky escapes on four, both close lbw calls and one successfully reviewed, but then batted fluently with his flicks and drives until his exit.

England kept chipping away, as Hartley, who returned figures of 4-77 with his left-arm spin, sent back Axar lbw for 45 to leave India six down by tea.

Ashwin played a stubborn knock of 29 before Ahmed took him down to wrap up the innings with his third strike.

Earlier, in the first session, Shreyas Iyer made 29 and was out after a moment of magic by Stokes.

Iyer attempted a big hit off Hartley but Stokes sprinted back from mid-off and dived at full stretch to pull off a screamer of a catch. Anderson, in an excellent morning spell of fast bowling, rattled Rohit Sharma's stumps with a superb delivery that pitched and moved away from the right-hander.

The old warhorse then got the left-handed Yashasvi Jaiswal caught at first slip, for his 695th Test wicket.

India had a lead of 143 at the start of their second innings and began the day on 28-0.

Shubman Gill passed the number three test with a gutsy hundred here on Sunday, repaying the immense faith the Indian team management showed in him.

After scoring 104 out of India's second innings total of 255 against

Tom Hartley celebrates wicket of Shreyas Iyer PHOTO: PTI

England on the third day of the second Test, Gill was a pleased man.

It was his first 50-plus score in 13 innings and the first substantial knock after deciding to move down a place in the batting order."It was very important and very satisfying for me to be able to score runs at number three. It felt pretty good, especially in the situation given when we lost Yashasvi and Rohit, as they were good at giving us good starts at the top of the order.

"I think it was important for us to get a big lead and to be able to get as many runs as possible," said Gill, who survived two close DRS calls early in his innings before gaining confidence.

England 67 for 1 (Crawley 29*, Duckett 28) and 253 need another 332 runs to beat India 396 and 225 (Gill 104, Axar 45, Hartley 4-77, Rehan 3-88, Anderson 2-29). —*PTI*

Mumbai left-arm spinner Shams Mulani (5/60) beat England A by 134 runs PHOTO: INSTAGRAM

Shams grabs 5 wkts as India A beat England Lions

SURAT, 4 FEB

India A spinners turned the knife into England Lions' batting line-up to give their side a commanding 134-run victory on the fourth day of the third and final unofficial Test in Ahmedabad on Sunday. Chasing an improbable 403, the Lions were bundled out for 268 in their second innings as India A bagged the three-match series 2-0. Mumbai left-arm spinner Shams Mulani (5/60) and Madhya Pradesh off-spinner Saransh Jain (3/50) grabbed eight wickets among them as England crumbled after resuming from overnight 83 for two.

England Lions opener Alex Lees, who started the day from 41, completed his fifty and looked good for more.

But his stay was cut short when Mulani trapped him in front of the wickets for 55.

England were 120 for 4 then and they lost another three wickets while adding 20 more runs to slip to 140 for seven.

Mulani added the scalps of Lions' skipper Josh Bohannon (18) and Dan Mousley (5) to his kitty in this period.

However, the Lions were not ready to fade away without one last fight.

Wicketkeeper-batter Ollie Robinson (80, 105 balls, 7x4, 2x6) and James Coles (31, 58 balls, 3x4) added 104 runs for an entertaining eighth-wicket stand from a little over 23 overs.

The Lions moved past the 200-run mark with ease, but it always was the case of getting that one wicket. Mulani did the job of snapping the partnership, winning a leg-before appeal against Coles.

Once Jain castled Robinson, the Lions' innings and the match came to a quick close.—*PTI*

Man United eases past West Ham

OLD TRAFFORD, 4 FEB

What a week for Manchester United and their next generation.

While the potential of Kobbie Mainoo and Alejandro Garnacho was already evident to those who have closely followed their development through the youth system, the 18-year-old's injury-time winner at Molineux and Garnacho's impressive brace against West Ham served as resounding reaffirmations of their capabilities.

Rasmus Hojlund was a man on a mission in a "revenge game" against West Ham United PHOTO: AP

United ran out 3-0 winners despite West Ham starting the better side. But the visitors' confidence was thwarted when Rasmus Hojlund continued his excellent goal-scoring form.

The Danish striker picked the ball up 20 yards from goal, faked a shot that sent Nayef Aguerd the wrong way, and fired home with his weaker foot past Alphonse Areola.

Garnacho doubled United's lead moments after West Ham should have equalized. The 19-year-old cut onto his left foot and his effort deflected off Nayef Aguerd into the back of the net. —*AP*

India seal its place in World Group I

ISLAMABAD, 4 FEB

The Indian Davis Cup team capped off its historic visit to Pakistan after 60 years by sealing a place in World Group I as Yuki Bhambri and Saketh Myneni handed the side an unassailable 3-0 lead in the play-off tie with their comfortable win here Sunday.

Yuki Bhambri PHOTO: PTI

Taking the court with a 2-0 lead in the pocket, Bhambri and Myneni subdued the home team of

DAVIS CUP

Muzammil Murtaza and Aqeel Khan 6-2 7-6(5) in the doubles rubber to extend India's dominance over Pakistan in the tournament. Aqeel replaced Barkat Ullah in the side. The idea was to have an experienced player for the do-or-die match, a defeat that gave India the tie.

However, Bhambri and the big-serving Myneni did not put a foot wrong in the match in which they were not troubled by their rivals much. The gulf in quality between the two teams was apparent.

Myneni's big serves were too hot to handle for the home team. Myneni hardly lost a point on his serve and was also superb at the net. The Indian players' returns were also better as several times Bhambri sent down winners between the two Pakistani players.

It was India's eighth win in as many meetings in the event, called the World Cup of Tennis and now it will compete in World Group I in September this year while Pakistan will stay in Group II.

The Indian team adapted well to the tough conditions and the heavy security around them, not letting the restrictions on their movement hurt them.

The Pakistan Tennis Federation (PTF) did well in creating a safety net around the players

—*AP*

Amandeep Kour, Rajasthan received the 12th All India Police Archery Championship 2023-24 Trophy from Karnataka CM Siddaramaiah on Sunday PHOTO: PTI

Niemann PHOTO: AP

Joaquin Niemann has to settle for 70 as his LIV Golf

MEXICO, 4 FEB

Joaquin Niemann goes into the final round of LIV Golf Mayakoba with a four-shot lead without having a round in the 60s. A day after Niemann shot 59, he had to settle for a 1-under 70 on Saturday to maintain control.

Masters champion Jon Rahm, the biggest name to sign with the Saudi-funded league during the offseason, overcame an early bogey to post a 67 and join Dean Burmester (66) in the group trying to track down Niemann.

This is the opening event in the third season of LIV Golf with its 54 holes and shotgun start.

Niemann was at 13-under 129.

Niemann had an opening round in which everything felt easy. This was more of a grind. He bounced back from an early bogey with three birdies over a five-hole stretch to close out the front nine at El Camaleon.

At one point, Burmester had cut the lead to two shots after Niemann made a pair of bogeys, but the 25-year-old Chilean birdied the par-3 15th and Burmester bogeyed his last two holes. Burmester and Niemann are among the LIV players who thrived in the offseason. Nieman won the Australian Open. —*AP*

Avani shoots 71 but drops to 11th

PATTAYA, 4 FEB

Avani Prashanth shot a third straight under-par round but still dropped to 11th at the 2024 Women's Amateur Asia Pacific Championships (WAAP). She now has rounds of 68-69-71 and is 8-under for 54 holes and placed 11th in the strong field.

Avani's third round had two birdies and one bogey and one of the birdies was from the bunker, where she holed her shot.

The leader is Chinese Taipei's Chun-wei Wu (66) at 18-under and she was followed by Rianne Mikhaela Malixi from the Philippines, who had an eagle on the Par-5 10th. She put together a record round of 9-under 63 and is second at 14-under.

India's Saanvi Somu, just 15, and playing her first WAAP, shot 75 and is tied for 48th. Saanvi had two birdies against five bogeys.

Malixi had a bogey-free round with seven birdies and an eagle and was excited to have shot the lowest round in the tournament's history.

She won the Australian Masters of Amateurs last month and was third at the WAAP in 2022 on the same course.

Avani did not have a great day with her iron play and left long birdie putts, most of which she was unable to convert.

She said, "I hit probably every fairway, but my approaches were just either too long or too short.

Everything is in the line of the pin, which is very frustrating. I couldn't convert after hitting it that far off.

—*AP*

Vinesh clinches 55kg category gold in National Wrestling

MUMBAI, 4 FEB

Asian Games gold medallist Vinesh Phogat clinched the 55kg gold medal in the Senior National Wrestling Championships being organized by the IOA-constituted ad-hoc committee, here on Sunday.

Vinesh showcased her experience by defeating her opponent from Madhya Pradesh Jyoti 4-0 despite the ace grappler competing in a higher weight category. The 29-year-old Vinesh, representing the Railway Sports Promotion Board (RSPB), had won the 2018 Jakarta Asian Games gold in the 50kg category, while her title triumph at the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games had come in the 53kg category.In another keen contest, 2021 World Championship silver medallist, Haryana's Anshu Malik defeated 2020 Asian Championship gold medallist Sarita Mor (Railways) 8-3 in the 59kg category.Haryana women dominated the proceedings, taking the top spot with 189 points and narrowly pushing powerhouse RSPB to second spot with 187 points. —*PTI*

RANJI TROPHY

Manish helps Karnataka win over Railways

SURAT, 4 FEB

Veteran batter Manish Pandey conjured all his experience to score an unbeaten fifty that helped Karnataka eke out a nervy one-wicket win over Railways on the third day of their Elite Group C Ranji Trophy match here on Sunday.

Chasing a tricky target of 226 to win, Karnataka huffed their way to 229 for 9 as Pandey stayed unbeaten on 67 off 121 balls with six fours and a six.

Earlier, Railway, who resumed from overnight 209 for eight, were bowled out for 244 in their second innings.

Pacer Vysakh Vijayakumar, who later did his bit with the bat as well, was the most successful bowler for Karnataka with a fifer (5/67).

With this win, Karnataka has topped Group C with 21 points and is poised to enter the knockouts with two more league matches pending.

After the early departure of opener Dega Nischal (1), Karnataka appeared to be on the right track as Ravikumar Samarth (35) and KV Aneesh (34) guided their side to 70 for 1, adding

Manish Pandey scored an unbeaten fifty that helped Karnataka to a one-wicket win over Railways PHOTO: PTI

69 runs for the second wicket. But from that point, Karnataka lost three wickets while adding just five runs, slipping to 75 for four as left-arm spinner Akash Pandey (5/94) inflicted a few blows.

But Karnataka made the first pushback through Pandey and wicketkeeper batter Sharath Srinivas (23) as they milked 34 runs for the seventh wicket.

But Pandey remained nerveless to collect those runs in the company of Vasuki Koushik (1 not out).

At Ahmedabad, Tripura notched up a big 156-run win over hosts Gujarat to go third on the Group C table with 14 points.

Gujarat could not offer even a smidgeon of fight as they were shot out for 161 in their second innings.

Medium pacer Sridam Paul (3/16) and left-arm spinner Parvez Sultan (3/58) grabbed six wickets equally among them to wreck Gujarat.

At one stage, they were 79 for six and a 50-run partnership for the seventh wicket between Umang Kumar (37, 55 balls) and Siddharth Desai (47, 55 balls) helped them go past the 150-run mark.

Brief scores:

At Surat: Railways: 155 & 244 all out lost to Karnataka: 174 & 2nd innings: 229 for 9 in 82.4 overs (Manish Pandey 67 not out, Vysakh Vijayakumar 38, R Samarth 35, KV Aneesh 35; Akash Pandey 5/94) by 1 wicket.

At Ahmedabad: Tripura: 141 & 343 beat Gujarat: 172 & 161 all out in 52.3 overs (Siddharth Desai 47, Umang Kumar 37, Het Patel 30; Sridam Paul 3/16, Parvez Sultan 3/58) by 156 runs.

At Porvorim: Goa: 241 & 168 all out in 65.5 overs (Suyash Prabhudesai 79; R Sai Kishore 4/82, S Ajith Ram 4/36) vs Tamil Nadu: 273 & 2nd innings (target: 137): 61/1 in 26 overs (S Lokeshwar 34 batting).

At Mohali: Punjab: 477/2 in 107 overs (No play on 3rd day).

—*PTI*